

CUMBAYAH SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

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By

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The community of Parkchester in the Bronx, New York is a rich mixture of cultures, religious traditions, and racial and ethnic diversity. It also home to a rising number of single parents. Though not unique in its urban composition, it is exceptional in its community out-reach. Surprisingly, one resource that has been found sorely lacking is the support of the Church. Personal research of over one hundred Bronx churches discovered Church-sanctioned, intentional, single-parent ministries all but invisible.

This project addresses the critical issues of the rise of single-parent families in a traditional family Baptist Church. The methodology of creating a Church ministry focused on creating a “Safe Haven” for parents and children alike. This will be demonstrated by the deliberate concentration on training and equipping current members to provide inter-generational support, guidance, and wisdom with a spiritual foundation.

There will be a focus on the historical/ theological foundations that foster much of Church tradition that hinders effective implementation of ministry to single-parent families. Further, suggestions for alternatives, strategies and practices will be considered.

To my mother who struggled as a single parent yet encouraged me to reach to the heavens. To our ancestral families, especially those who went through the middle passage, were oppressed in slavery, yet found strength and a closer domestic bond by asking God to Cumbayah.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression
defend the fatherless
plead for the widow
Isaiah 1:17

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INTRODUCTION

It was the last week of new members' class, the closing prayer had been rendered, and those who were to be baptized the next Sunday had been lifted up to the Lord. Everyone was outwardly excited, as their Christian journey was about to have its genesis. I looked around the class and witnessed genuine joy in the faces of those who were involved. But in the midst of this joy my eyes met with a set of eyes that held an unavoidable look of inward turmoil. I recognized the look for two reasons: first, I have seen this look several times in the new members' class and, secondly, I have worn that same expression for a major portion of my life.

I heard my name as the class began to disperse. "Reverend Pride, can I talk to you?" I said of course and looked straight into her sad eye—the revelation of brokenness that had been shrouded for so many weeks was quite evident at that moment. She told me she could not be baptized. She felt unworthy, dirty, full of sin. She was a single mother and knew God could never forgive her. She expressed a great deal in a very short interval, for it was as if the festering wound she had been bandaging had now ruptured and all the vileness of the infection was exposed and required immediate release and healing.

I understood this woman; I had compassion for this woman; and I could empathize with this woman because I have been a single parent. Yet, how could I convince her of her worthiness, her value to the God we serve?

I took time to explain God's love for her and the forgiveness that God extends through Jesus the Christ. As I talked, I witnessed her slowly seep back into the shroud of disbelief and despair. She had probably heard this many times before, but had not felt this love and forgiveness in her life. The healing, as I knew from personal experience was not to be instantaneous. I have been one of the single-parent statistics. I was born to a fifteen-year-old unmarried mother and then became a single parent myself, first through a teenage pregnancy, and later in life, through divorce. I know the inner wounds of single parents go beyond economics and childcare—the wounds can be immeasurably deep. The damage can be caused by less obvious pain. The pain of loneliness; of choosing to live with someone and being told you are living in sin; the pain of struggling with sexual desire; the pain of living each day of your life feeling unworthy of love because society tells you—in the media, music, movies—that you are worthless. The ultimate pain is feeling unworthy of God's love. I understood this young woman's embedded misery and reluctance to be baptized. Jeffrey Jones, in his book, *We Are Baptists: Studies for Adults*, states that "[b]aptism in the Baptist Church is a Church ordinance and signifies a person's outward demonstration of their acceptance of Jesus the Christ into their lives. It is a symbolic dying to old ways and being re-born as a new creature in Christ."¹ I suspect she had some of the same frailties that kept me from the church and baptism until my middle years. I realized she needed much more than I could offer in the new members' class. That Sunday, everyone came and was baptized—that is, everyone except for her. I never saw or heard from her again.

This scenario had been repeated more often than I care to admit in the new members' class. I struggled with my inadequacy—to articulate God's love effectively,

¹ Jeffrey D. Jones, *We Are Baptists: Studies for Adults* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2001), 5.

along with my own single parent experiences without making it seem unique. I realized because of the complexities of single parenting, I could not single-handedly assist in God's mandate to help the "widows, the orphans and the poor." I struggled with what my church could do to extend themselves to a unique population of people: single parents—who while not openly ostracized, were not readily embraced and empowered. I became determined to create a ministry that embraced the needs of women, men, grandparents, and adoptive caregivers—those who found themselves parenting alone. I perceived a family of God that listened and accepted the task as the writer of the book of Isaiah penned: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

I had previous experience with teaching the new members' and the discipleship classes that helped new members begin to assimilate into the church with some knowledge of Baptist polity, doctrine and tradition. I had been the co-coordinator of the Rites of Passage ministry of the church. I have taught several teacher-trainings. Each of these ministerial endeavors, I know now was preparation to equip me to formulate a ministry that was focused on single-parent families.

The New York Theological Seminary afforded me the necessary vehicle to raise the awareness of the Parkchester Baptist Church to the challenges confronting single parents through my Doctor of Ministry project/dissertation. In preparation I researched comparable ministries. With the help of my son and husband, we completed a random phone search of one hundred churches in the Bronx, New York. Of the sixty respondents, none had a single-parent ministry. We found one large church in Queens, New York that advertised on the Internet. It advertised a single parent ministry but when called, we

learned the church only had a singles ministry. The lack of single-parent ministries, particularly in the Bronx, confirmed to me the need for this outreach in the church. Many churches in the Bronx have a singles ministry, but these ministries cater to the single person, not the single parent and their children. An article by Changing Families ministries in Georgia, states that:

- There is a different social focus for singles and single parents.
- There are childcare concerns that singles do not face.
- Single parents are faced with many more financial obligations and restrictions than singles deal with. Indeed, 45% of one-parent homes headed by moms have income below the poverty line.
- There is a lack of spontaneity that singles are not facing.
- Single parents are also unable to commit large blocks of time to social events or ministry functions, such as mission trips.
- Because of these problems, single parents are unlikely to attend on an irregular basis.²

Harold Ivan Smith, in his book *Pastoral Care for Single Parents*, writes:

Some churches, some individuals find the call to security and caution more compelling: “We’d really like to help but...” Others will wait until the ministry is more common, more accepted, then jump in after they have had ample opportunity to observe the pitfalls to avoid.³

Our experience with the project concurred with the above statement. Initially the idea of this ministry was met with apathy by deacons and some elders of the church. This was confirmed by three site team members which included the chairperson of the

² Changing Families, “One-Parent Families and the Local Church,” *Changing Families*, <http://www.changingfamilies.com/pastors.htm> (accessed February 13, 2009).

³ Harold Ivan Smith, *One-Parent Families: Healing the Hurts* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1981), 40.

Christian Education ministry identifying members of the Parkchester Baptist Church that were willing to participate in the project. In a formal questionnaire circulated in July 2007 at the church there were positive responses toward outreach to single parent; but verbally people voiced lack of interest. Approximately one hundred and twenty-five members, including single parents, were surveyed, and twenty-five (20%) responded. There were a total of twenty questions in the written survey. A sample of the questions and their responses follows:

1) How could our congregation better support you as a parent?

(11)- Childcare, (5)- support group (3)- mentors (6)- no answer

2. How well does our congregation help you grow in faith?

(20)- Responded very well with bible study or sermons (5)- left answer blank

3. Where are parents least visible in the church?

All respondents said leadership/ministerial staff

4. How does the Church address the relationship between fathers and mothers who choose not to wed?

(3)- It's a sin (5)- the church does not deal with the father (12) - ignores the situation. (5) – no answer

5. In case of emergency whom can the single parent depend on?

(20)- family (3)- friends (2)- the church

The deacons felt there were already too many ministries in the church. One elder felt there did not seem to be a problem in the church with single parents. One single parent stated, "We have each other, we don't need the rest of the church." Another young mother exclaimed, "I am busy, I go to school, I have homework and the baby. I

don't need one more opportunity for someone to preach to me.” As my listening skills increased I began to hear what the single parents required from the ministry. The ministry would have to be tailored to the needs of the participants: the ministry had to be welcoming and affirming; the ministry had to emulate a godly-family atmosphere of love and trust. Many of the participants were struggling with multiple life challenges. One such member—a young woman with a teenage daughter—had been clean and sober for one year. She had been struggling with self-esteem issues, struggling with daily living, and struggling with a teenager. Another member—a single-parent father—had to struggle with time management, relational, and after-school childcare issues.

This demonstration project would have to offer an alternative to struggling alone. The project provided a safe haven that created an atmosphere of trust and peace in non-judgmental, confidential surroundings. Faith Fellowship Partners were educated and trained by the pastor to listen, support, and pray for the single parents and their children. Prayer was the essential component to the success of the project. Each meeting, whether with the single parents, the site team, or church members, commenced with prayer. I agree with Richard Foster in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*:

To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.⁴

By the end of the project, it was observed the single parents had increasingly incorporated prayer into their lives. It was through prayer that I was able to discern the hand of God assisting in the ministries creation.

⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 33.

The ministry's name came about when I heard a co-worker sing the spiritual *Cumbayah* after a conflict with another co-worker. It occurred to me that this was a good name for a ministry involved with people who are experiencing all kinds of conflict in their lives. I suggested this name to both the site team and the ministry members, who agreed unanimously. Cumbayah Single Parent Family ministry became the official name, but as the ministry grew and became an active element of the church it was usually referred to as just "Cumbayah." Floyd Cooper in his book, *Cumbayah*, explains, "Cumbayah (also known as Kum Ba Yah and Kumbaya) means 'Come by here' in the Gullah language."⁵

In her National Geographic News article, "Gullah Culture in Danger of Fading Away," Dahleen Glanton wrote:

The unique language, a melodic blend of 17th and 18th century English and African dialects, is rarely spoken among the Gullahs, or Geechees, as they are called outside South Carolina. Since the 1950s, their farms, their fishing holes and the sea grass fields that fueled their artistry have fallen victim to bulldozers. Other traces of the culture, such as cooking, medicines, storytelling and even magical hoodoo, are increasingly harder to find...As older generations die, coastal development moves in and young people leave to find work, the people who once thrived along the coast from northern Florida to North Carolina are struggling to hold on to the ancient customs that defined their culture and remained intact almost a century after the emancipation.⁶

We felt it appropriate that this ministry—created for a modern day group of people on the fringe of society, searching to find the presence of God—have a name that, whenever mentioned, would be invoking the manifestation of the Lord.

During the ten months (March 31 to December 26, 2008) of the project, teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, law enforcement officers and several other church

⁵ Floyd Cooper, *Cumbayah* (New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1998), 2.

⁶ Dahleen Glanton, "Gullah Culture in Danger of Fading Away," *National Geographic News*, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/06/0607_wiregullah.html (accessed January 29, 2008).

members gave workshops. They became involved in the Cumbayah discussions, and/or were available for referrals. This included the pastor who was available for counseling and crisis intervention. Serious issues did arise in the lives of the single parents—eviction, loss of employment and addiction relapse—that were referred to the appropriate person or place. By the end of the project the single parents had researched and compiled a comprehensive resource book to help them and the community find assistance when needed.

Because of the variety of challenges the single parents experienced, the site team and I discovered that by using the church's human resources, we would be raising the awareness of the Parkchester Baptist Church family and empowering each other. Further, our supposition that finances should not prevent the formation or development of a ministry was well founded. It also was decided we would include as many ministries as possible in the project process as to encourage the church family's embrace of the single-parent family. Church members who would not ordinarily come to a single-parent workshop might be at the church serving food or setting up the sound system and learn something that might sensitize them to single parenting. By the end of the project we would have a waiting list of church members who desired to share their expertise.

It is demonstrated in this project that the holistic healing of a broken, human vessel is multifaceted and multi-dimensional—involving social, political, economic and theological issues. It requires God working through numerous people to heal a shattered heart. The Cumbayah Single Parent Family Ministry consisted of the single parents, their children and a seven-member site team that was the supportive foundation for this writer and the ministry. It was my desire that the site team come from the Parkchester Baptist

Church and community. Each member chosen contributed their expertise in assisting me in research, leading workshops, training the laity and numerous other task and activities too numerous to list. The site team was made up of professionals in the medical field, social work and education fields. The members were Ms. Ingrid Moses, chairperson of the site team and Sunday school superintendent; Mrs. Audrey Washington, chairperson of the Christian Education ministry; Mr. Andre Washington, chairperson of the music ministry; Minister Tonya Gaston; Deacon Trannie Washington; and Deacon Emeritus Douglas Williams. The group came with indispensable expertise, their knowledge of the Parkchester Baptist Church was invaluable—their insights into the dynamics and specific culture of the Parkchester Baptist Church proved an extraordinary asset in completing the goals of the project. The site team met throughout the project—first weekly and later every two weeks. Because of the frequency of this committee’s fellowship, prayer, and communication, the site team became the foundation in accomplishing the goals and strategies of the Cumbayah Single Parent Family Ministry project. The project will be explained in five chapters.

Chapter One explores the question: What are the exclusionary factors in the church that alienate and hinder single-parent church assimilation? In researching over one hundred Bronx churches, I discovered church-sanctioned intentional single parent ministries all but invisible. This chapter will take a look at scripture 1Timothy 5:3-16 and explore some of the exclusionary measures of the church towards widows or today’s single-parent mothers.

Chapter Two focuses on the history of the Parkchester Baptist Church, its setting, and locale. Understanding the history of Parkchester Baptist Church helped me to

understand the radical change of culture and tradition—from an ethnically European church, to a church of the African Diaspora. The congregants have not readily accepted the change not only in the church demographics, but in the community demographics as well.

In Chapter Three I present a critique of the relationship between the Black church and family. Biblical/Theological perspectives will be examined. Changing the attitudes of a traditional family church through various teaching methods is discussed through two research questions:

1. Has biblical exegesis uncovered a biblical paradigm that specifically designates the description of the family or have views of the “acceptable” family been guided by social pressures?
2. How can one educate a traditional family-oriented congregation to embrace families of non-traditional structure?

Chapter Four gives details of the plan of implementation through a discussion of the process of completing:

- Goal 1- Raising the awareness of Parkchester Baptist Church to the challenges of single parent families.
- Goal 2- Recruit and train Parkchester Baptist Church members.
- Goal 3- Creating a “Safe Haven” at the Parkchester Baptist Church.

There is a focus on the methodology of creating a church ministry centered on creating a “Safe Haven” for parents and children alike in an inclusive atmosphere. It was my hypothesis that the human resource base in the Parkchester Baptist Church was immense; by giving the education required they would be a valuable asset to the ministry

and community. We illustrate how that was accomplished. A factual account will be rendered of the practical aspects in creating the Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry at the Parkchester Baptist Church.

Chapter Five is an introspective glimpse into my ministerial competencies and my personal project plan. I explain the development of my confidence in being a prophetic agent and administrator in listening and articulating the needs and sensitivity of single parents to the Parkchester Baptist Church.

CHAPTER 1

The Black Baptist Church and Single Parent Inclusion

What are the exclusionary factors in the church that alienate and hinder single-parents church assimilation?

The Black church has developed an ethos of family entrenched in its experience of slavery, survival and its spirituality brought to the Americas from Africa during the middle passage. Slavery in all its ramifications, as deeply enmeshed in violence and mental cruelty to individuals, but particularly to families. In her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Joy Degruy Leary, states: “[t]he slave experience was one of continual, violent attacks on the slave’s body, mind and spirit. Slave men, women and children were traumatized throughout their lives and the violent attacks during slavery persisted long after emancipation”.⁷

Slave families were fully aware that at any time a family member—mother, wife, husband, father; child—could be physically and emotionally assaulted in unimaginable ways. However, the deepest wound was the willingness of the slave owner to destroy families by selling any member at his whim—a power yielded purposely to destroy the spirit of a slave family. Another tactic to weaken the family structure was the interpretation of scripture to justify the atrocities of slavery. “Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness

⁷ Joy Degruy Leary, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Uptone Press, 2005), 14.

of your heart, as unto Christ;” (Ephesians 6:50 KJV). The slaves intuitively understood there was something inherently wrong with the Word of God that condoned obedience in such an ungodly atmosphere. The Black Church was born in the midst of these horrendous struggles. The Black Church has made enormous strides in the years since slavery, but it lags behind on issues such as the increase of single parent families in the community and church, with all its ramifications.

Frequently the same tensions in the world manifest themselves in the church. Some of today's tensions are policies on morality regarding marriage relationships; the role of woman in the church and the family; and issues of single parent family inclusion and alienation. The problem of single parent families has become increasingly visible in the Church because of the statistical increase of single parents in the community. What is alarming from our research conclusions is that despite the economic and social famine found across the United States, and particularly in its urban centers, few are heeding the cry of the single parent in the pews. Few churches in the Bronx are actively reaching out to the fatherless and widows. I certainly concur with the insights of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “The church once changed society. It was then a thermostat of society. But today...the church is merely a thermometer, which measures rather than molds popular opinion”.⁸ This is the challenge of the “Church”, to become that thermostat so there will be a transformation whenever people come into the house of the Lord. It is this challenge that remains unmet in many churches especially as we attempt to extend our hand to single parents.

⁸ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, *I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 97.

Who is the “real” widow? Harold Smith, author of *One-Parent Families: Healing the Hurts* elucidates: “Paul listed the qualification for assistance: A widow or *chera* (one without a mate) seeking aid from the church.”⁹ Widows were women who had absolutely no options for economic survival. She was without extended family, or sons who could earn a livelihood. A commentary on the subject states:

This passage is the oldest evidence (along with Ign.Polyc. 4.1; Polyc. Phil. 4:3) of an order of widows in the church. The word enrolled is a technical term was kept. ‘Elders were ordained following the Jewish form (4.14), but lack of precedent in Judaism for the dedication of women to religious work perhaps explains why widows were simply ‘enrolled’. This, however, may have taken place with solemnity in the presence of the assembled congregation’ (Easton, Pastoral Epistles, p.153). Obviously strenuous efforts were made to keep the number of enrolled widows small. They would of course be selected from the larger body of widows, being (a) real widows in the sense of vs. 3-6; (b) sixty or more years old; and (c) committed to life service; in addition to having the character requirements of vs. 10 and to being married only once (see 3:2).¹⁰

It is clear that many stipulations were executed as to when, how and if the church would assist certain widows. It is also apparent that not all widows were welcome to partake of the Church’s hospitality. Perhaps this is one of the reasons today’s widows are welcomed into our churches half-heartedly. In the *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and their Child Support: 2005*, released by the U.S. Census Bureau, the approximately 13.6 million single parents in the United States today are responsible for raising 26% of children under 21 in the U.S. today.

- Approximately 84% of custodial parents are mothers
- 16% of custodial parents are fathers
- 44% are currently divorced or separated (mother)
- 33% have never married (mother)
- 1% were widowed
- 57% are divorced or separated (father)

⁹ Smith, *One-Parent Families: Healing the Hurts*, 36.

¹⁰ George Arthur Buttrick et al., *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), 436.

- 24% are currently married (In most cases, these numbers represent men who have remarried)
- 18% have never married (father)
- 1% were widowers
- 79% of custodial single mothers are gainfully employed
- 50% work full time year round and 29% work part-time or part of the year
- 92% of custodial single fathers are gainfully employed
- 74% work full time year round and 18% work part time or part of the year
- 27.7 % of custodial single mothers and their children live in poverty.
- 11.1 % of custodial single fathers and their children live in poverty.
- 31% of all single parents receive public assistance, only 6% of single parents receive TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). 37.7 of custodial mothers are 40 years old or older, 56% of custodial mothers are raising one child from the absent parent. 44% have two or more children living with them.¹¹

Paul could never have fathomed that in 2005 there would be over 13.6 million single parent families in the United States. The author Harold Smith states:

“[P]arenthetically, it should be noted that Paul was speaking to those without husbands, which has generally been translated ‘widow’. There are no instructions for widowers because it was naturally assumed they would remarry”.¹² Paul could not imagine a world where only 1% of the (*chera*) women without husbands are “real” widows and 1% are “real” widowers in the USA. Who embraces all the people without mates and their children? Today there are massive federal, state, and city budget cuts, with social services disappearing—especially in the communities that are most in need.¹³ Given the definition of the church rendered in this research, the church appears to be considered an

¹¹ US Census Bureau, “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and their Child Support: 2005,” US Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-234.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2008).

¹² Smith, *One-Parent Families*, 36.

¹³ William Yardley, “Faced with Fiscal Adversity, Governors try to Embrace it,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2008.

alternative source of resources to the single parent family. Unfortunately that is not the reality. In an article; *Single Parent Family: Confronting the Obstacles* the writer, Eric Furge, delineates several obstacles to single-parent ministry. According to Furge these are as follows:

- Single parent ministry is not easy
- Confusion regarding the goals of single parent ministry,
- The enormity of the task,
- Lack of ministerial and lay involvement.¹⁴

One of the exclusionary factors I personally experienced as a single parent was the attitude that “you reap what you sow.” There are consequences to sin. That is true, but there is also compassion that should be extended by the church. Theresa McKenna writes in her book, *The Hidden Mission Field*: “

There are consequences when you do not obey God. Divorce and illegitimacy are the consequences of sin, and I would not suggest they be condoned. But they must be forgiven. God has not put sexual sins in a special category that is titled “unforgivable.” It is we, in the church, who have tended to harbor unforgiveness for divorce and illegitimacy. God loving people often say to me that providing ministry to single parents condones their behavior. I don’t believe that. I don’t condone violent crimes, but I believe in prison ministry...Although every sin has consequences, not all of them are as obvious as broken families. What about the innocent people who get caught up in the consequences, particularly the children? Regardless of who is at fault, how can we deny ministry to nearly one-third of our nation’s families?”¹⁵

There are singles ministries and family ministries in many churches, but the lack of single parent family ministry suggest there is a bias on the part of the church—refusing

¹⁴ Eric Furge, “*Single Parent Family: Confronting the Obstacles*,” Kentucky Baptist Convention <http://www.kybaptist.org> (accessed January 3, 2009).

¹⁵ Theresa McKenna, *The Mission Field: Caring for Single Parent Families in the 21st Century* (Mukilteo, Washington: Wine Press Publishing, 1999), 18-19.

to be God's agent of forgiveness. The word of God says: "[t]hen Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me?' 'As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.'" (Matthew 18:21-22 NIV). Two members share painful memories: One of the deacons of Parkchester Baptist Church shared; "At the Bethlehem Baptist Church in South Carolina in the early sixties when young unmarried women had babies, they would have to stand before the church and ask for forgiveness." The President of our local N.A.A.C.P. shared:

I was thirteen when my older sister wanted to have her baby baptized in the church and the pastor refused. I understood my sister was unmarried but the baby was innocent. I went and pleaded with the pastor but he adamantly refused to baptize the baby. I left the church and didn't return until I was forty.

At the Parkchester Baptist Church dedicating children back to the Lord used to be included in the worship service. However there were some members who took exception to single parents dedicating their children during the service. The tradition of parents dedicating their children to God was then changed to Saturdays from Sundays to avoid the perception that the Parkchester Baptist Church was treating married and unmarried families differently. Church members then complained of the inconvenience of Saturday dedications. Presently children dedications are on Sunday at the end of the service. Although this example is subtler than those previous memories, these types of decisions add to the alienation that hinders the full inclusion of single parent families into the church. The Black church traditionally has an open door to all who wish to attend, but nonetheless find it difficult to support those whose transgressions are obvious, such as single parent families. Alice B. Tolberts comments in her article *The Crisis of Single-Parent Families*

There is even less support offered the single parent. There are many congregations where they are avoided, perhaps seen as a threat to other families as an unattached adult. Some may be ministered to as a single within a singles group, but here again single parents have unique problems that truly single people do not. Sad to say, most churches have not addressed this problem at all.¹⁶

Alienation is fostered in the church when the church has inadequate understanding of the different configurations of single parents. One of the first “family gatherings” of the single parent ministry made a deliberate effort not only to delineate the types of single parent families, but also to point out the different types of families at the Parkchester Baptist Church. It is important to educate the congregation that people are single parents through many different circumstances: an unmarried pregnancy, divorce, death of a spouse, by choice, single grandparents, and single parents through adoption or foster care. While the majority of the single parents in the Church are female, there are single male parents in the church as well. With this information a dialogue was initiated to begin to probe the entrenched feelings of both the congregation and the single parents. It was discovered through dialogue that female single parents were treated with aloofness. And the male single parents were treated with respect and admiration—it was assumed the woman had been at fault, otherwise, she would have the children. As communication increased so did the revelation that the church should accept the single parent family without preconceived bias and judgment.

A church member wrote in her evaluation after a workshop on the family: “I didn’t know there was so many kinds of family. I also didn’t know that the problems they have are in all single parent families male or female. I really would like to help the fathers and the grandmothers. I am available any time.” After an open and honest

¹⁶ Alice B. Tolberts, “The Crisis of Single-Parent Families,” *Network for Strategic Missions*, <https://www.strategicnetwork.org/index.php?loc=kb&view=v&id+15> (accessed February 21, 2009).

dialogue, the participants discovered misconceptions and biases in themselves, which prompted a desire for further dialogue between the single parents and the church

This project investigation has revealed many churches continue to keep their blinders on when considering the needs of single parent families. Personal research of over one hundred Bronx churches with a 60% rate of response, discovered Church sanctioned intentional Single Parent ministries all but invisible. Alice B. Tolberts states further in her article:

The church cannot be content to rely on social agencies alone to tackle this problem. A wholistic approach is needed. Weeds do not stop growing when you cut them off at the surface. The root must be extracted. For all of these families in crisis, their problem is spiritual. The church in submission to Jesus Christ has the only solution, which will deal with the problem at its root.¹⁷

The demonstration project presented opportunities for group interaction to explore the challenges of the single parent family in a spiritual context. Themes were used such as: Parenting African-American Children, Today's African-American Family and Single Parent Families. The struggles, hurts and the joys of parenting were discussed within a biblical and personal contemporary context.

This method was inclusive and informal. It promoted critical thinking in a safe environment. It is reciprocal in its learning techniques as the dialogue flows back and forth between single parent and non-single parent. It created an in-depth discussion that fostered tangible results. We discovered in this environment emotions can be readily exposed and the pain lifted up for the group to identify. Further analysis produced healthy avenues to resolve the pain. A member of the ministry had confessed she had not told her daughter she was not her mother. The biological mother had been rehabilitated

¹⁷ Tolberts, "The Crisis of Single-Parent Families," 14.

and wanted the child returned. This young girl had been raised in the Parkchester Baptist Church. As is in many Black churches the children become the churches children. After hearing the person's heartfelt dilemma the whole group—single and traditional parents alike—offered to accompany her to court; books to read to her daughter about adoption, baby-sitting to give her some free time, and an ear to listen. It was in these moments of “family” interaction that barriers were let down and the church began the process of embracing our single parent families.

The oracle of God mandates, “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow,” (Isaiah 1:17 RSV).

The words of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 RSV seem to be more the pattern of the modern church:

Honor widows who are real widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplication and prayers night and day, whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command this, so that they may be without reproach. If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. But refuse to enroll younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us. For some have already strayed after Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; let the Church not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are real widows (1 Timothy 5:3-16 RSV).

The words “Let not the Church be burdened” are an oxymoron when referring to the mission of God’s church. Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson define the church in their book, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, as:

In the first place, the Church is a people. Early Baptist sought to remind themselves of this fact by calling the places in which they met “meeting houses.” The word church was reserved to apply to men and women in divine-human fellowship...second, not only is the church people, but the people of God...It is God who has called the church into being. The third point is that the church is to be seen as a close-knit fellowship, not simply as a collection of loosely related individuals. Indeed, one of the most impressive terms by which the inner meaning of the church is expressed in the New Testament is fellowship (koinonia)...fellowship signifies participation in the divine life and power, a life which is characterized by sharing. Beginning with sharing which we experience in the salvation of God, it goes on to include sharing the good news with others and even sharing one’s property. The church then is fellowship, or community, a participation in the life of the Spirit...Fourthly, the church acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord. He is “the Head of the church”...Not only do his remembered teachings furnish guidance for the life of the church, but the Holy Spirit makes Christ present as its living Lord. His will supersedes all human claims.”¹⁸

The burdens of single parenting are very real. Their burdens run the gamut from loneliness to child-care to finances. Many churches, especially community Black churches do not have immense budgets to meet the material needs of these families. “Let not the church be burdened” certainly was a challenge, but a challenge that was and can be met by any church that is serious regarding this ministry. An appeal went out from the pulpit for food coupons to help defray the cost of groceries. This was met with an exuberant response. The ministry participants themselves were given an assignment to find community resources and present them. We eventually compiled a large resource book to help the single parents and the community. These two request—one from the pulpit and the other for the ministry created an atmosphere of inclusion and camaraderie.

¹⁸Norman H. Maring, and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1991), 28-30.

Everyone could relate to a time when they were in need. It progressed to the development of a food pantry supplied by church and community organization donations

When entering into *koinonia* each individual in the fellowship should be made to feel they are reflective of the “*Imago Dei*” and not a burden. The Word of God should be instructive, relevant, and revelatory when spoken to God’s people. It should inspire single parent families to choose life in all its abundance regardless of their life conditions. The Word should also arouse the Church to go out and promote justice and liberation for *all* people of the community, regardless of race, gender, age, economic or social status, marital status, or family configuration.

One of my professors at New York Theological Seminary, T. Richard Synder, states in his book, *Once You Were No People*:

While maintaining our posture of humanitarianism and love for the “deserving poor,” we nonetheless manage to respond to the alienation of millions of victims by blaming them. One has only to look at our welfare system to see the alienation maintained through victim blaming in the context of a program supposedly designed to help the victims. In the face of massive poverty, increased unemployment, and dislocation due to “development,” we continue to blame people for needing welfare. In the face of rules that make it impossible to receive Aid for dependent Children if there is a father living in the house, we continue to blame women for having babies without husbands. In the face of a bureaucratic structure that makes it almost impossible to maintain one’s composure, let alone one’s dignity, we continue to blame for trying to beat the system.¹⁹

Although written over twenty years ago, these words still ring undeniable true. Many churches continue to have a myopic view of the family structure. To be anything other than a traditional family must be the result of sin. This, although seldom verbalized, is manifested in actions, or raised eyebrows when a single parent sits in the

¹⁹ T. Richard Synder, *Once You Were No People* (Bloomington, Indiana: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), 44.

pews or when a pregnant teen comes through the church door on Sunday. Many churches readily blame the mother as a single parent but are silent about the father.

Father Paul Sretenovic in his article: “Unwed Mothers: the Calvinist and the Catholic Answers:” explains,

The Catholic recognizes that through the Sacraments of Confession, the guilt of sin, as well as at least a part of the temporal punishment correspondent to that sin are removed from the sinner’s soul... This is the Calvinistic understanding of predestination, and the Puritans were members of this sect. The Catholic Church does not have the same view of God or predestination. The Catholic Church does not look down on such a woman or expect her to bear the mark of her guilt upon her person, like a cursed woman. But, at the same time, the church does not deny that the woman must still bear the consequences of her action after Confession, even if she made a perfect Act of Contrition, and would thereby be worthy to enter Heaven if she should die that very moment. The social situation of the mother and child does not change after Confession and the completed penance; and yes, no matter who has argued to the contrary since I first broached the subject over a year ago, it is not advisable the woman should be included in all the many other normal social life at the parish.²⁰

This same mindset is not unique to Catholicism but permeates the church. The stigma of single parenthood prevents assimilation and promotes alienation into the mainstream life of the church; regardless of the persons’ heartfelt repentance. This lack of total acceptance into the family of God leads many single parents to frustration, disappointment and disillusionment with the church. This may result in them leaving the church altogether.

Deborah M. Harris writes in her article, “Black Seventh-Day Adventists and Single Parenthood:”

This disappointment can perhaps be explained by the tendency for churches to limit their assistance to single-parent families in their

²⁰ Fr. Paul Sretenovic, “Unwed Mothers: The Calvinist and Catholic Answers,” *Tradition in Action*, http://www.traditioninaction.org/religious/k011rpUnwedMothers_Stretenovic.html (accessed February 15, 2009).

particular congregation. Single parents are hesitant to express their needs to fellow church members because (1) they fear public exposure of their personal business and (2) they wish to avoid being pitied. This leads the church to respond inadequately; because its response is based on the person's expressed needs rather than his/her actual needs. Consequently, single parents who rely on the church as a coping mechanism experience frustration and increased stress because of the church's response.²¹

One of our single parents who participated in the demonstration project stated: "I just don't feel worthy, it's like everybody is waiting for me to mess-up. They are always watching me, like I am going to do something wrong." Unfortunately this single parent did have a crisis and kept it to herself; at the time of this writing she is not attending church. It is this limited success that hinders many churches from enthusiastically embracing single parents.

Deborah M. Harris found in her study of single parents in the country and within the Seventh-day Adventist Church that:

Churches were not interested, would not give of their time, and participated extensively in gossip. Why the lack of appropriate church support? First, many SDA churches have a difficult time accepting the deluge of single parent families. Because the church has been slow to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem, appropriate responses are lacking. In addition many churches claim a lack of understanding of the needs of single Parents.²²

Our research at Parkchester Baptist church revealed apathy and denial that the dilemma existed, until the issues of single parenting were exposed by increased communication and education through the demonstration project. It was also revealed single parents contribute to the church's reluctance to incorporate them totally into the church family fellowship.

²¹ Deborah M. Harris, Ph.D., "Black Seventh-Day Adventists and Single Parenthood," Oakwood University, available from <http://www.oakwood.edu/ougoldmine/ldoc/perspective/perspective16pdf> (accessed February 15,2009).

²² Ibid.

Eric Fruge, director of College-Church relations at Georgetown College and former single adult minister suggests that:

[M]any single parents have negative perceptions of the church. More specifically, they fear the church will impart to their children negative images of their family and parents. What are some of these images? Consider the following: Single parent families are subnormal and dysfunctional; parents who are single by virtue of divorce are second-class Christians and unworthy for important church roles; church is the happy family place—families in crisis please stay out of the lime light!; Church is a “couples” world where singles are marginalized. In their daily efforts to give their best to their children, many single parents simply will not take them to churches where they risk being taught that their family life and parents are substandard and inferior to everyone else. While some churches do communicate those ideas, most do not impute inferiority to single parent families and single parent should not assume they do.²³

Many who come through the church doors come in broken and beaten down from society's inequities and prejudices. Many have been led to believe that they are not worthy of forgiveness. This is certainly how I felt as a single parent visiting the church. I could not fathom a God that could love me—wretch that I am. These feelings of inferiority render many single parents vulnerable and suspicious of the “saints” of the traditional church.

Two methods were found to be effective in raising the awareness of the single parent's worthiness in God's sight. The first was scripture through bible study and sermons. The second was scripture acted through the drama ministry—in interactive plays. The word of God's love and compassion illustrated in these diverse teaching methods afforded not only the single parents the opportunity to realize their worthiness but raised the awareness of the whole church family.

²³ Eric Fruge, “Single Parent Family: Confronting the Obstacles,” *Kentucky Baptist Convention* <http://www.kybaptist.org> (accessed January 3, 2009).

Theresa McKenna gives this additional insight in her book *The Hidden Mission Field* that may impact churches' reluctance to participate in single parent family ministry:

By its very nature, Single parent Family Ministry is distinct. Most churches are set up with a number of different spheres of ministry. There is youth ministry, men's ministry, women's ministry, children's ministry, singles ministry, family ministry, etc... The church, for the past several decades, has separated into groups, either by chronological age or by gender. Single-parent family ministry does not necessarily fit neatly into another sphere. In fact, it tends to invade others. It represents a new paradigm, because it is all of the above.²⁴

Theresa McKenna goes on to expound on single parent ministry being a vast hidden mission field. She states:

The overwhelming majority of them do not attend church. Some of them are born-again believers who simply do not feel welcome. But they are not obvious. Rather, they represent a hidden mission field camouflaged by the society around them that looks just like us. We've missed them right under our noses... When we talk about revival in the church, we must consider that the single-parent families are ripe for harvest. The church will explode if we intentionally minister to these families.²⁵

In completing the Cumbayah Single Family Ministry project there were other obstacles that factor in the reluctance to perform this extremely relevant and essential ministry.

- Motivating the church
- Limited financial resources
- Lack of space
- Incorporating the children

In the final analysis of this project, what was found to be the major key to overcoming the obstacles that may hinder embracing the single parents was to

²⁴ McKenna, *The Hidden Mission Field*, 105-106.

²⁵ Ibid., 108.

incorporate them, incorporate the children, and then incorporate all the ministries to volunteer their gifts. This promoted church involvement, resulting in increased Church empowerment, enthusiasm, and encouragement of the single parent families of the Parkchester Baptist Church. Further, it was discovered that raising awareness by effectively training and equipping the church to use the expertise of its members was also a major component in loosening the constraints placed in the way of assimilating and embracing single parent families into the Church

CHAPTER 2

SOMEBODY’S CRYING, MY LORD, CUMBAYAH The Parkchester Baptist Church: Past and Present

Focusing on the Problem

The Past

One obstacle to creating an effective Single Parent family ministry is that critical information has to be gathered. This is absolutely vital to understanding the major issues that signified the relevance of the project. To that end, a brief history of the Parkchester Baptist Church will be provided, along with an analysis of the Parkchester community.

In 1940-1941 the East Bronx’s largest housing community opened, the Parkchester Condominium and Apartments. The opening of Parkchester Community afforded an opportunity for a Baptist witness in the east Bronx. In 1946 a number of interested residents began group meetings in various homes in the area. The New York Baptist City Society was approached with the proposal for a Baptist witness in the Parkchester Community and their assistance and cooperation was obtained. On October 23, 1946, the first organizational meeting was held by fifty-three members, in the Parkchester School of Music, 1510 White Plains Road. A call was extended to Rev. Harold B. Lundgren of Syracuse, New York. Rev. Lundgren accepted the call to the Parkchester Baptist Church and became its first Pastor. He began his duties on

November 1, 1946. Under Rev. Lundgren, the “Parkchester Baptist Church” was formally named and a constitution approved. The current edifice, located at 2021 Benedict Avenue, was constructed with funds borrowed from the New York Baptist City Society and the World Mission Crusade of the Northern Baptist Convention.

In an interview with the oldest remaining member of Parkchester Baptist Church Deacon Douglas Williams, he stated:

When I came to the church over 40 years ago it was predominantly Euro. They were predominantly Greek and German with traditional family structures. Ministries in the church were developed to promote the family such as Vacation Bible School, Junior High Baptist Youth Fellowship and the Junior and Senior Bowling Teams. The community and the Parkchester development in particular with its white only policy remained Euro until the 60’s. In 1968 the Fair Housing Act paved the way for people of African descent to move into the Parkchester community.

The first Black man joined Parkchester Baptist Church during that time, he was a baritone singer and he was not married. Little by little the ethnicity of the Church changed, as did the community. The first African American pastor Rev. Hillary Gaston was installed in 1990. Over the next few years the last remnant of European descent members left.²⁶

The Present

Since 1990, Parkchester Baptist Church has changed from a predominately Caucasian congregation to a multi-cultural congregation of predominantly people of the African Diaspora. As the community became more diverse, our congregation mirrored this change with members of Latin, Asian and Native American descent. We also recognize that our new members mirror the community in family structure, as high percentages are single parents. Many of the new members God is sending to the church are riddled with complex social issues, coupled with a limited knowledge of God. At stake is their survival and salvation. Parkchester Baptist Church has a sense of

²⁶ Deacon Douglas Williams, interview by author, Bronx, New York, November 22, 2006.

community and connectiveness; as it has a theology of covenant. Covenant theology is the premise that God penetrates the very lives of God's people and enters into covenant with humankind.

The vision statement developed by the membership under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and our pastor the Rev. Dr. Laura B. Sinclair's leadership addresses the church's endeavor.

The Parkchester Baptist Vision Statement

The Parkchester Baptist church's vision is to be a unified, GOD-centered body, bold in Christ; evangelizing and expanding his territory, while following God's mandate and tithe. We strive to create one family under God. We work toward financial stability, open-mindedness, and true fellowship with one another. We strive for the enhancement of God's kingdom on earth. We embrace and nurture one another to create a safe haven for all people. Welcoming all with out-stretched arms, we will reach out to the community through faith, love commitment, and prayer from a spiritual and bible based perspective. We therefore make a Global commitment to lead all to Christ!²⁷

According to our purpose and our covenant the Parkchester Baptist Church should join together in Christian love and fellowship. We should be mindful to celebrate our unity in diversity to include the multiplicity of family configurations.

In reality we found the Church is struggling to corporately experience the transcendent Spirit of God. Of the 250 active members we identified 46 admitted single parents that currently comprise 18.4% of Parkchester Baptist Church. Our research discovered apathy to change by the church when invited to meet and discuss the challenges confronting our church community, such as gangs, poor education and single parent families. The project "Cumbayah Single Parent Family Ministry" was created to

²⁷ Parkchester Baptist Church, Bronx, New York, "Vision Statement," April 2006.

be one of the tools used to increase the awareness of these issues and in addition to lessen the struggle of inclusiveness at the Parkchester Baptist Church in particular.

Analysis of the Setting and Locale

Parkchester was originally designed and operated as a self-contained rental community for middle class families new to home ownership. To that end, there is an abundance of worker and family oriented resources, including access to transportation, nearby schools and churches, retail shopping space, and proximity to a major medical center. The resident population of Parkchester reflects the changing ethnic makeup of the Bronx over nearly 70 years of history. Moreover, there is a broad age distribution due to multi-generational nature of the neighborhood.

Our community is growing—with one particular demographic group, the elementary school-age youth growing rapidly. Our schools are overcrowded, and our students are unable to successfully learn, and teachers are unable to successfully educate. Since there has been more housing developed recently in the Soundview and Castle Hill areas, it became even more necessary to build new schools. A new high school has been proposed and approved in the Soundview area. An already existing school, James Monroe High School, has been redefined and rebuilt to accommodate our growing needs. The school has become six smaller, specialized high schools created to maximize the potential of existing and future students.

The growth of our community has consisted of a sharp increase in the number of African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians. The number of elderly residents has increased dramatically, as well. Most alarming of all is the increase in the single-parent population

of our community. According to the statistics rendered by City datat.com for the zip code of Parkchester 10462:

The projected population by 2007 is 73,297 of that 9,103 are married couples with children and 7,760 are single-parent households. These households are 1,153 single parent men and 6,607 single parent women. 18.1 of the community residents are below the poverty level.²⁸

The unique challenges of finding adequate employment, educational opportunities, and responsible childcare have become more severe than ever before. The community lacks new and improved options for childcare. The school system should be expanded and enhanced to avoid overcrowded classes and to provide productive activities for children to participate in after school.

In doing this research it became increasingly evident that an effort should be made to establish in the Church a place where children and their parents could come and find a respite, resources and possible restoration. By the end of the project, in its efforts at becoming an inclusive family, the outreach emphasized by the Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry had become a priority of the Parkchester Baptist church. Some of the outreach efforts are R.E.A.P, (Recreational Educational After- School Program), emergency child care, child care on Saturdays, and a food pantry, open on Tuesdays and Thursdays 6:00pm-7:30pm.

²⁸ "10462 Zip Code Detailed Profile," *City-Data.com*, www.City-data.com/zips/10462.html (accessed February 16, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

SOMEBODY’S PRAYING, MY LORD, CUMBAYAH Discovering the Relationship Between Church and Family

Research Question: Has biblical exegesis uncovered a biblical paradigm that specifically designates the description of the family unit for society, or have social pressures guided views of “acceptable” families?

The word *family* is defined by Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary as “[t]he collective body of persons who live in one house, and under one head or manager; a household, including parents, children, and servants, and, as the case may be, lodgers or boarders”²⁹. Our society has been conditioned to view a family as consisting of two parents, and variation is a deviation from the norm. This conditioning has occurred over many generations; although throughout history there have been many examples of varying familial makeup. Examples of the variety of families can be found throughout the Bible.

God created Adam alone initially, “[I]t is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18 RSV). After Adam was allowed to examine all the animals of the earth, God chose to create Adam’s mate from Adam’s own rib. This act, the creation of woman, is the first example of a family unit. “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh”

²⁹ s.v. “family,” *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/family> (accessed January 3, 2009).

(Gen 2:24 RSV). As a biblical paradigm, the union of man and woman is established very early in Genesis. Adam and Eve were meant to be a pair, and they give us the idea that the bond between man and woman is especially sacred. As the first family, they represent an ideal union. Throughout history, Christian societies have striven to emulate this ideal. Life for the first family would have been perfect in Eden, but once they were cast out into the world they faced many perils. In order to survive, they would have to work. Whenever there is work to be done, the burden is lightened with the more hands that are available to participate. “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain,” (Gen 4:1 RSV). Adam and Eve multiplied; the birth of their child represents the first natural birth of man. His job would have helped to provide for the family. Over time, this family would continue to set the precedent for families to come: they continued to work, grew in number, suffered tragedy, and spread to new lands. Families today go through this same cycle of life. In that respect, Adam’s monogamous family group can be seen as a paradigm that continues to be sustained to this day. With that said family groups of many kinds are also discussed in The Bible, one of which is the polygynous family.

Polygyny is defined by Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary as “The state or practice of having several wives at the same time; marriage to several wives”.³⁰ The first person in The Bible to practice this lifestyle was Lamech. He had two wives, who each bore him multiple children. The Bible says, “And Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other was Zillah,” (Gen 4:19 RSV). No

³⁰ s.v. polygyny, *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/polygyny> accessed January 3, 2009.

explanation is given as to why Lamech would do this, or why his wives would agree to the arrangement. What is told of their family is that their children were the progenitors of people from various walks of life, from herdsmen to blacksmiths. The ability to bear children is a blessing, but it takes time. One woman can only produce but so many children in a given time, while having two wives can greatly increase the rate at which your family grows. Lamech and his family have set a new precedent in the Bible, one that will become an increasingly more common practice as the narrative continues. Of course, in order to have multiple wives and numerous children, the family must be able to sustain itself. Lamech's children are credited with useful skills, which could lead to wealth. If the family could not support its own size with resources to spare, this arrangement would not be beneficial to them. The increasing number of occurrences of polygynous families as the Bible story unfolds alludes to the benefit it must incur for its practitioners.

Lamech and his family can be seen as establishing a new paradigm. People from all walks of life are depicted in this practice, including royalty. Abraham's wife Sarah found a solution to her inability to bear children by providing her servant, Hagar, to her husband. Genesis 16 goes on to explain that Hagar became the mother of so many descendants "that they cannot be numbered for multitude" (Gen 16:10 RSV). Soon after, Sarah is blessed herself to become "a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen 17:16 RSV). The Bible neither condemns nor condones the practice, but King Solomon does incur the wrath of God by ignoring His law. The Bible states in 1 Kings 11:3 that King Solomon had 700 wives and princesses, as well as 300 concubines. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines a concubine as "A

woman who cohabits with a man without being legally married to him”.³¹ With the wealth that King Solomon had accrued, he could surely support such a court, but that was not the issue. The Bible states,

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods”; Solomon clung to these in love (1 Kings 11:1-2).

King Solomon lived polygynously and it didn’t arouse attention from the Israelites or God. His marriage to women from forbidden lands was his downfall. Although our society tends to frown upon this form of family, The Bible establishes it as a viable way of life in ancient times. Social pressures have slowly phased this practice out, and now it is illegal in many places.

The Bible also sets a precedent for single parent families. Through various circumstances, people like Lot and Zarephath find themselves with children but without a spouse. In these two circumstances, God treats them both favorably. Lot is saved from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, but his wife is turned into a pillar of salt because she does not follow God’s direction to not look back. Zarephath is an obedient widow and mother who is told to feed the prophet Elijah. She does so, and is blessed with food and oil during a time of famine and drought. When her son falls ill and dies, Elijah pleads on her behalf for God to revive him. Her son is restored to life. Zarephath says to this, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth”, (1 Kings 18:24). In 2 Kings Chapter 4, further evidence of God’s protective love for widows is shown. When the prophets of Israel have either been

³¹ s.v. “concubine,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

killed or chased into hiding, one widow comes to Elisha for help concerning her sons. They are to be sold as slaves to pay a family debt. Elisha miraculously provided her with the means to pay her creditors, and thus save her sons. Although they occur less frequently, single parent families are scattered throughout The Bible. As long as they obey the law of God, they are treated well, and at no point is their marital status the *cause* of any pain or retribution from the Lord. Today, we seem to look negatively upon the single parent, regardless of the circumstances that led to the situation. Clearly, this is not a result of biblical analysis, because at no point in the Bible is anyone punished strictly for being a single parent.

Once Hagar is sent away from Abraham's home, she is essentially a single parent. Abraham sends her on her way with "bread and a skin of water" (Gen 21:14 RSV), and a baby. Of course, she experiences all of the fear and despair someone would be expected to in such a situation. She has also established a biblical paradigm, that of the single mother who relies on her faith in God to guarantee the well-being of her child and herself. The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is quite profound. Hagar does not choose to be in the position she has been put in, but she must deal with her circumstances nonetheless. Through God's unending grace, she is able to not only survive, but to prosper. In Genesis 21:14-21, she wanders in the wilderness when she is unsure of her fate, but once her faith is bolstered that wilderness becomes a "safe-haven" for her and her son.

Although this story is quite popular, it does not carry the same connotations as other familial stories in The Bible. There are a select few who see in Hagar a paradigm of strength, nurturing, and resilience. Her plight is rarely used to inspire others in a

contemporary setting who may be experiencing the same things she did. Adam and Eve, King Solomon's wives, and Lot's escape from Sodom and Gomorrah are known throughout our culture and are referred to quite often in both religious and secular situations. The fact that a biblical paradigm exists is evident, in fact, there are many. Yet, one valuable precedent that is set early in The Bible is relatively unknown in modern society. Biblically, there is no reason for this. Socially, we have been indoctrinated into a mindset that ostracizes the very people we should be looking to aid. In Harold Ivan Smith's book, *One-Parent Families: Healing the Hurts*, he states, "All adults have an investment in the spiritual and emotional nourishment of children because they are the future leaders of the church, a precious natural resource".³² Mr. Smith goes on to describe the role of the community in biblical times,

Since there was no governmental assistance program, the first government (the family) even shared material blessings. Storehouses were formed where "the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied" (Deut. 14:29). Specifically, a tithe of all the produce gathered every third year stocked the storehouse.³³

With the understanding that The Bible does not specify a "correct" family structure, we can still see that the paradigms for many forms of family life have been established. We also have seen the establishment of a paradigm for social action. People who are in need should be taken in and protected by those who are able. We are all part of the human family, and since the times of Adam and Eve people have toiled together in order to make their lives better. Our current society's habit of excluding and ignoring those whom we deem "unworthy" goes against all that the Word of God has expressed as righteous.

³² Smith, *One-Parent Families*, 30.

³³ Ibid.

Research Question: How can one educate a traditional, family-oriented congregation to embrace families of non-traditional structure?

The congregation of Parkchester Baptist Church can be described as family-oriented. While the congregation is made up of people of all ages, some of their practices and beliefs have been influenced by experiences outside of a church setting. With this in mind, I began to formulate a plan that would facilitate the process of growth and inclusion where previously there had been stagnation and exclusivity. I realized that the task would be daunting, to say the least, but wanted to approach it with a sense of joy. I know that God is teaching through me, as He has with many others before.

Knowing that my goal was to bring about a change in the Church, I began to analyze the task. The first obstacle that must be addressed is gaining a true understanding of my skills as a facilitator. In order for me to give information to others, I must have a grasp of the best methods to do so. With that thought, it became clear that I must also have a clear picture of the congregation—who exactly am I trying to give this information to? The clarity necessary to teach someone can only be gained through true and honest analysis—that would be the first mission of this undertaking.

I have always thought of myself as a capable teacher. My experience as a Healthcare Professional has afforded me many opportunities to hone my craft as a trainer over the years. The skills used in that environment, however, were not always as effective when applied in a church setting. While I usually taught in a lecture format to employees at work, this was not effective when dealing with a congregation. According to Dr. Jerold W. Apps, being able to set ineffective practices and habits aside in order to

utilize skills that will be more successful is a key to being an effectual instructor.³⁴ This process may not be easy, but versatility in instruction will greatly increase your chances of success. Different people are receptive to different communication styles and being comfortable with the fluid nature of communication rather than the rigid structure of lecturing is vital to altering entrenched opinions that are not necessarily based on facts.

Knowledge of the subject matter is another necessity when instructing others. Being a single parent myself, I have experiences and emotions that can only be expressed through conversation—my stories have always been able to inspire, console, or admonish—depending on the context in which they are given. Their value is immeasurable to my goal, but they remain anecdotal. In order to have the congregation embrace single parents as a group, I must be able to express the actual plight of the entire group. Dr. Apps states, “One important dimension of taking charge of your teaching is to take charge of your own learning – to keep up with both the subject matter you teach and the ways in which you teach it”.³⁵ I realized how little I actually knew of the subject, and worked to rectify that problem. A congregation will need to know exactly what they are dealing with when in the process of change; and my active pursuit of information on the subject will assist that. Becoming a well-rounded educator, with a factual knowledge base will help ease any congregation through the process of change.

The congregation of Parkchester Baptist Church is very diverse in age, but my focus was on our adult members. I have been an instructor for both the youth and the adults in the past, but I felt it was important for me to look at this as an entirely new teaching experience—since I would be trying to teach them to accept something new. I

³⁴ Jerold W. Apps, *Mastering the Teaching of Adults* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1991), 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

wanted them to see each other as a whole, a “family”, not as distinct factions of “worshippers” who segregate themselves based on pre-conceived notions of righteousness. According to Romans 8:35, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Rom 8:35 KJV). There is no one alive who can separate us from the love of God, but at times people tend to act as if they have forgotten this. Judgment can be a painful weapon, and to sheathe it would take time and effort. At this point, I began to study the congregation not as a spiritual body alone, but also as a group of learners. Their capacity to learn is critical to the embracing of our single parent families as true members of the congregation.

Adult education, according to Dr. Apps, is not completely different than educating young people. He encourages instructors to move away from lecture-based teaching and involve the learners more. He states in his book *Mastering The Teaching of Adults*:

[I]n fact, the public schools, in most instances, have redefined what “teacher” means and what teachers do. Indeed, we can learn much from teachers working today in elementary and secondary education. Many of these teachers involve learners in extremely creative ways; they incorporate educational technology in an interesting manner, and they work toward applying what learners learn to real life situations.³⁶

Applying knowledge to real life has been very beneficial when trying to make information take root in the congregation. Rather than merely hearing something with little connection to what is said, they have started to feel the lessons as if they were experiencing it themselves. This immersion in real life experience has lit a spark inside many people who had no interest or need for a single parent ministry. Rather than

³⁶ Apps, 57.

saying, “we need your help,” we have been successful by showing people exactly how essential their help is to our ministry.

In Thomas R. Hawkins’ book *The Learning Congregation*, he states:

A learning organization is one in which individuals are always growing, learning, and creating. It is an environment in which there exists mutual respect and a willingness to examine both one’s own assumptions and those of others.³⁷

If our congregation is to be considered a learning organization, we must continue to grow, create and learn. Even more importantly, we must foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, so that every one of us feels welcome and comfortable enough to express how they truly feel. I believe we are on our way.

Devising a curriculum and teaching style that will enrich and empower the congregation in their learning is the next crucial issue we must tackle. As we have already mentioned, this organization will learn best when faced with an interactive, inclusive teaching style rather than one that merely “preaches” right from wrong. The congregation doesn’t really need to be told the difference between right and wrong—they have heard it many times and in many forms. What they need is to feel the difference between right and wrong. When adapting my teaching style to the task, it became clear that my desire was to become what Dr. Apps calls a *Gardener*. The Gardener practices a style that attempts to clear away impediments to the growth process, while providing the necessary information to foster growth. Once this has occurred, the learners are able to grow on their own: without the previous barriers and lack of knowledge to slow them.³⁸ I believed that the congregation was metaphorically a garden; I was elated by the potential

³⁷ Thomas R. Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 4.

³⁸ Apps, 23.

for development. So many of the prejudices we are surrounded by in daily life become part of us without us actively choosing them. This was a wonderful opportunity to address at least one. I would give the necessary tools, but I would watch as the garden grew by itself, each flower helping others.

Dr. Jerold W. Apps has identified various methods to foster in-depth understanding of a particular topic when teaching adults. He mentions that each style may be useful not only in gaining new information, but also in developing critical thinking skills.³⁹ Teaching tools such as Quiet Meetings and Diad and Triads were not utilized in this project. While they are clearly effective teaching tools, these formats emphasized breaking into small groups or sitting silently.⁴⁰ I opted to use a more inclusive-yet-active approach, where the entire group had some form of interaction with each other and the structure could remain less formal. Some of the tools that Dr. Apps describes that I found quite useful were: Buzz Groups, Forums, Group Discussion, Role Playing, Simulated TV Show, and Questioning.⁴¹ The strengths of these teaching styles for our purposes lay mainly in the buzz groups; discussion and simulated TV show because dialogue and humor became our most effective agents of learning. When we laughed, we all could remember why and at what we laughed. The message being sent was absorbed much more readily when we could smile. Forums and questioning were effective in their own ways. We were able to invite some experts in various fields to our meetings and gained knowledge that I had no other way of acquiring. I am grateful that members of the congregation stepped up and offered their services on topics such as gang prevention, without which I would not have been able to present as clear a picture to the

³⁹ Apps, 95.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁴¹ Ibid., 102.

congregation. Questioning helped to break down barriers, and through the questioning process we were able to learn about ourselves. It was very emotional at times, but always ended on a positive note. We achieved a level of closeness with each other through this sharing that I believe could not be gained through any other teaching style.

Development of critical thinking skills is the final area that needs attention when teaching the congregation to accept and integrate new ideas. Dr. Apps explains that critical thinking is what allows a learner to apply new information to their own lives, to consider how it correlates to what they already knew and what to do with this new information. He further states:

[I]n our complex world, people want to regain control of their lives, their jobs, their communities, and their government. Critical thinking skills can help them to do this. As a teacher, you have an obligation to help people develop skills for critical thinking.⁴²

Once the congregation has learned and appreciates the knowledge that they have been given; it is imperative to make sure they are equipped to use it in a positive fashion. My approach was to move slowly along the process with each meeting, so we could expect measurable progress by the end of our project run. Asking the traditional family-oriented members of our ministry to change overnight would be unrealistic; but the gradual progression that I hoped for was realized with great success. Dr. Apps has stated that the critical thinking process is best learned when there is time between each meeting.⁴³ As we worked through the process together, I tried to make sure that no matter where each individual was in their growth, we could always discuss our feelings openly and see acceptance of our single parent families as a positive outcome.

⁴² Apps, 96.

⁴³ Ibid.,

The congregation has become much more accepting of our single parent families. Of course, there is still more progress to be made. We were able to address one important question that every one had asked at one time or another: “What else can we do to help the single parents?” During the course of the project, we were able to set up various aid ministries that were very beneficial to the single parent families. These included daycare services, overnight camp for the youth, and hotline services for the parents. What we were now interested in was looking further, looking outside of the church doors to find resources that were already established in our community.

Exploring the community to find resources for our single parent families started slowly. Most of our congregation was unsure where to begin looking; much less what would be acceptable. A fear of offending the single parents caused a great deal of trepidation in the beginning. We had a meeting to discuss the process, and decided that we needed to find as many resources as possible in our community, and it would be up to the single parents themselves to decide which they were willing to explore further and which they would choose to disregard. We looked at which services and resources the church could provide and tried to ensure that those we found in the community would complement our in-house services.

With our direction clearer, the congregation took off running. Every meeting, we had people bring in new ideas: some found websites for information, some found community food banks. We investigated social services like WIC and Welfare. Information about healthcare for parents and youth, as well as testing for sexually transmitted diseases was gathered. Resources on abuse hotlines and services were made available on the church bulletin board. We even found information on emergency

preparedness. Our plan was to gather all of this information into one place, and make it available to anyone who may need it. Our Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry Resource Book is divided into chapters by resource type, and is always available to be used or added to.

A great idea that was beyond the resource book was trying to alleviate some of the financial burden of our single parents by clipping coupons from newspapers and neighborhood circulars. This is a seriously underutilized resource, and it has come been a great help since we started the “Coupon Envelope”. Ideas like this showed me that there was a true concern for our single parent families. Tolerance had grown into inclusiveness, which was now growing into an embrace. Even more, the congregation had challenged themselves to come up with concrete and workable plans that the entire congregation could benefit from, not just the single parents. Critical thinking had led to more than I could have hoped for when beginning this ministry. They worked as a team and developed their knowledge base without being monitored at every turn. And the work continues to this day.

Finding unifying factors between groups is another great way to establish a commonality between them. Economics are a pressing issue for most families in the Parkchester Baptist Church congregation, but our single parent families feel a particular pressure here. As state and federal funding for social programs are slashed, these families suffer to survive far below the poverty line. We had many discussions on education, spirituality, and other topics—but economic strain was the topic that recurred most often. It became apparent that despite statistics, many of the single parent families in our congregation were struggling as much if not more than they had before 1996. In

that year, the Welfare reform Law was passed. It was designed to reorganize the distribution of funds and encourage the development of job skills to reduce the need for government assistance. In a report by the Urban Institute regarding The Welfare Reform Law of 1996:

The passage of welfare reform law in August 1996 signaled the end of “welfare as we know it.” The legislation transformed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, dramatically changing the nation’s approach to supporting needy families with children. Reform was intended to end dependence on government cash assistance by promoting job preparation and work. Benefits now carry a time limit and most recipients must meet work activity requirements. The 1996 law gave states new flexibility to implement their welfare programs, while creating incentives to encourage work and the formation of two-parent families and penalties to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. It also changed numerous other safety net programs, such as child care and child support. During the period just before and just after welfare reform, other federal programs that affect the work and earnings of low-income families were enacted or modified as well, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), food stamps, and Medicaid.⁴⁴

Despite inflationary cost of living increases and the damage to our economy after 1996, these changes to social services continue to be viewed in a positive light. Rampant closings of after-school programs, free summer breakfast and lunch programs in public schools, and other not-for-profit youth organizations have placed increasing stress upon our parents in general, but especially our single parents. Pointing this out to our congregation has provided another “common ground” between them and our single parent families, because many of them can relate to feeling a lack of social services as well.

⁴⁴ The Urban Institute, “A Decade of Welfare Reform: Facts and Figures,” *The Urban Institute*; <http://www.urban.org/publications/900980.html>; (accessed December 12,2008).

FOCUS SITUATION

A few years ago the Parkchester Baptist Church had very few children. Gradually the youth returned and they brought their parents. A large number of the parents are single, with multiple social disadvantages—a lack of support, low paying or no employment, relational problems, lack of adequate childcare choices, low self esteem and poor parenting skills. This limits their ability to focus on spiritual development and many have left the church even before completing New Members Class. Those that have joined Parkchester Baptist Church seek spiritual guidance and mentoring. This has been surely inadequate as the established traditional church family lacks the spirit of inclusiveness for non-traditional families. This non-acceptance prevents the hand of God from reaching out into this wide-ranging community of Parkchester with its rich mixture of cultures, religious traditions, and racial and ethnic groups and its large population of single parents. According to “The Bronx an Economic Review,” reported by H. Carl McCall, State Comptroller

The Bronx also had the greatest proportion of families headed by a single householder (36.6%) and the least proportion of married-couple families (31.4%) among the four boroughs outside Manhattan. Finally, when comparing the number of married-couple families with their own families’ children against all families with their own children, the Bronx is the only one among the five boroughs where the majority of these families are headed by a single parent (57.4%).⁴⁵

Consequently, the focus situation is how to concentrate on training and equipping current members to provide inter-generational discipleship and mentoring to single parent

⁴⁵ H. Carl McCall, *The Bronx: An Economic Review*, Office of the State Deputy Comptroller for the City of New York Report I-2003, 12.

families. The single parents on the site team, along with a small sample group that have been interviewed, voiced a need and relevance for this project. Some of comments were: A 50 year-old, single, adoptive parent of a physically challenged 7 year-old declared her major need from the church was someone to volunteer to watch her son for short periods. She also stated, “I miss bible study and church because I don’t have a sitter. Even if it was for an hour it would be so helpful to me. The church might consider doing something for special needs children.”

A 30 year-old divorcee with a daughter said that “[t]he church can be a very cold place to be. I came in with a preconceived idea that these church people were better than me. I had my guard up. The only reason I stayed here was because my sister was here. You know they used to talk to her to tell or ask me something. They would not speak to me directly. My sister had to tell them over and over go ask her yourself. Finally they did. Few talked to me about my daughter at all. A lot of the senior people forget where God brought them from. They only remember where they are now.”

A single male parent in his forties said, “At first I felt ostracized because I was not married to my girlfriend. Then I became the sole caretaker to my son and I was upheld as the ‘Trophy’.” I was admired as both mother and father.” Mr. X feels that “all of God’s people should be accepted in the church without judgment but with encouragement. There should be mechanisms of dialogue and support for single parents in every church ministry; everyone should be embraced no matter what.”

All the single parents I spoke with expressed the desire to be paired with a mentor. But not all thought it should be intergenerational. This was surprising to me. With further dialogue it was felt the older people could not, or would not, empathize or

understand their needs. At the end of the project it was discovered through intergenerational dialogue that the single parents realized the elders of the church had experienced some of the same difficulties and had a great deal of wisdom to share.

CHAPTER 4

SOMEBODY NEEDS YOU LORD, CUMBAYAH

Plan of Implementation/ The Challenge

The initial task in bringing this project to fruition was to select a committed group of people that would assist in this project. The projects goal was that these volunteers be members of the Parkchester Baptist Church and community. This allowed for a realistic discussion, agenda and praxis regarding the needs of the single parent families in the church. Each member chosen contributed their expertise in leading workshops and training the laity. The site team that was chosen was available not simply to me but to the single parents and their children as well. They became my prayer partners. They became my shoulders to cry on and my shoulders to lend me additional strength. The site team gave me an extra hand, including assisting with finances. I originally had six site team members. Later I added a single parent to the group but she was unable to commit to the demands of the team. One member left due to illness in the family and was replaced. The site team was made up of professionals in the medical, social work and education fields. The final site team members were the Site team chair and Sunday School Superintendent, Ms. Ingrid Moses; the Chairperson of the Christian Education Department, Mrs. Audrey Washington; Chairperson of the Music Ministry, Mr. Andre Washington; Min. Tonya Gaston; Deacon Emeritus Douglas Williams; and Deacon Trannie Washington. The group came with indispensable expertise but their knowledge

of the Parkchester Baptist Church was invaluable. Their insights regarding the dynamics and specific culture of the Parkchester Baptist church proved to be an asset in bringing the project to completion. Our first meeting was in a restaurant over dinner. I gave each member a binder with what was expected of me as a New York Theological Seminary D Min program candidate and, more importantly, what was expected of each of them as site team members. They were expected to assist in the training of the Church membership and the single parents. They were to be involved in the evaluation process. They were to help in gathering information and resources for the ministry. They were also given a notebook for journaling. In the final analysis these internal opinions and insights were very useful in establishing an attitude conversion in the church. We discussed ideas for the ministry, and its relevance. However, it was responses I had received from a single parent focus group I had met with from the Church, which revealed the required mechanisms of dialogue and support for single parents in every church ministry. In addition, there was a desire to be paired with a mentor. To further validate these responses a survey was given to the single parents of the Parkchester Baptist Church to identify in more detail their concerns and requests. The site team met throughout the project—first, weekly, and later every two weeks. Because of the frequency of this committee fellowship, supported by prayer and communication, the site team developed into the foundation that helped accomplish the goals and strategies of the Cumbayah Single Parent Family Project.

GOAL #1

At the end of the project the first goal to raise awareness was successful. This was accomplished by the following strategies.

Two workshops were given to bring about the endeavor of raising awareness of the Church membership to the challenges of single parent families. It was necessary to institute a campaign to advertise the workshops. This was carried out by the announcement of the ministry workshops from the pulpit by the Pastor Rev. Dr. Laura B. Sinclair. Harold Ivan Smith explains:

The pastor will be the cornerstone in developing a ministry with single parents. How he *or she (italics mine)* perceives such a ministry fitting into the Church's total program is critical—another program merely “tacked on,”—or an integral part of a comprehensive, compassionate care package for those who make up the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10 NIV)⁴⁶

I agree with what Harold Smith observed. At the Parkchester Baptist church the pastor's acceptance of the project was paramount to the opinion of the church regarding the relevance of the project. What Harold Smith states is especially crucial when it is not the pastor who is actually responsible for the ministry. It is paramount when the ministry is controversial. Smith expounds: “Single parent ministry is neither a fad nor a trend but a responsibility that is thoroughly biblical in its orientation. Any church that ignores the single parent family mortgages its own future and undermines its survival.”⁴⁷ To further reinforce the ministry's visible support Rev. Dr. Sinclair prompted the attention of the congregation to the single families in the church. An added advertising method was the ministries' workshop schedules printed in the weekly bulletin.

I conducted these initial workshops to set the tone of the project. It was imperative to present the information with passion. Additionally I have had personal experience as a single parent and could speak in familiar emotive language.

⁴⁶ Smith, 51.

⁴⁷ Ibid.,10-11.

“A Church-family Gathering” was held March 31, 2008. The workshop title was a deliberate effort to begin to create a single parent ministry while at the same time being inclusive of the entire Church family. All workshops and meetings were begun with prayer and a scripture lesson. The scripture for this first evening also set the tone of the ministry while meeting the goal of raising the church awareness, 2 Kings 6:24-29 and Acts 6:1-7. 2 Kings 6:24-29 speaks to the famine during a siege on Samaria. It tells of the inflated price of a donkey’s head and dove manure. It points to the economic injustices that were and are inflicted on those that are considered the least of them (Matthew 25:40). More importantly it speaks to the length people will go when they are hungry, or in despair, or alone, in a system. The scripture tells of two mothers agreeing to eat their sons for their self-survival. It appears all was well until one of the mothers apparently backed out of the agreement. Unfortunately, a meal made of one of the sons had been eaten. This scripture radiated a great deal of discussion about what parents and especially single parents may be driven to do in times of famine. Famine could be a metaphor or it could be literal depending on the circumstances. What the mothers did to continue to exist invoked group conversation.

To verify this I looked to Clemens Sedmak, who states in his book *Doing Local Theology*:

[A] way to unveil biases or to trace hidden values and implicit theologies is through the use of stories that present ambiguous situations with actors who act on the basis of different value systems. These “value stories” are a useful theological tool when we ask which actors in this are justified in acting the way they do.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 165.

Acts 6:1-7 explains the need of help for the apostles to take care of the spiritual need of the community without neglecting the temporal need of the widows. Here appears the first deacon (*diakonos*), which means servant.⁴⁹ This scripture gives credence to the church's necessity to be servants to one another (Galatians 5:13 RSV). This became the great rallying point for the ministry—the nine participants voiced a different perception of the scriptures. The single parents could relate and those who were not single parents could now actively enter into the dialogue.

There were two questions on the agenda. The first question, “Why are we here?” afforded the opportunity for a short didactic to be given to inform the group of our plan and purpose. An overview of statistics and neighborhood demographics presented facts to emphasize the need for the ministry.

The second question, “Who is the single parent?” clarified the multiple configurations: “A single parent may be un-married, a single parent may be a widow or widower, a single may be divorced, a single parent may have adopted a child, a single parent may be a relative that is the caretaker for a child”.⁵⁰

The next section of the workshop was: Let's get acquainted! Participants was asked to introduce themselves, give a reason they were at the workshop, and what they wanted to know about single parenting. I had a bit of trepidation about what Bell Hooks says regarding teachers sharing their personal story:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered

⁴⁹ J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, et.al., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), 269.

⁵⁰ Smith, 11.

by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.⁵¹

The church serves as a classroom in this context and in my role as prophetic agent I had to have the willingness to embrace risk in order to create social change. With this in mind, I began the conversation by offering a portion of my experience of being brought up in a single parent home riddled with abuse. I explained how I became a teen single parent, which led to an abusive first marriage that ended in divorce, leaving me a single parent for fifteen years. It was a monumental surprise to witness my story opening the floodgates. My exposure gave permission for others to be vulnerable. Everyone had a story to tell—single parents and guest alike. That night we learned a lot about each other. There was a video on the agenda in the event a verbal exchange was not generated. The video was not required. I learned from this first workshop to be flexible.

The next workshop was held for the entire church on April 26, 2008. There were fifteen participants. A different form of teaching method was utilized—a video presentation. “*Soul Mate*”⁵² consisted of several vignettes that touched on subjects from loneliness to HIV. The group was asked to write down the challenges they could identify with. Some of the responses were:

“I feel lonely and alone”.

“I have been celibate for several years, but I still have feelings, sometimes I just don’t know what to do.”

“Sometimes, I just need a little time away from the children, time for myself.”

⁵¹ Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 21.

⁵² Andrea Wiley, *Soul Mate*, DVD, (Los Angeles: Clean Hearts Productions, 2006).

The video opened a forum for conversation on issues that may not have been verbalized if a leader in the church had presented the subject matter. Utilizing the video as a form of communication allowed the viewer to become involved in someone else's story. Consequently their feelings are validated and they feel less isolated.

A group discussion was held after the video presentation.

Evaluation:

Nine church members attended the first Church gathering Of the Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry. This was 3.6% of the 250 congregation members. However, of the nine, three were single parents and the other six consisted of deacons and educators of the church. The unforeseen advantage was that the single parents gave the church leaders an opportunity to hear their stories; and gave the church leaders a chance to understand the need for the ministry. At the time of this first workshop Church members were questioning the need for another ministry in the Parkchester Baptist church. The church already had over 20 ministries. Would this ministry really make a difference? Second, it gave the leadership of the church an informal opportunity to express some of their personal experiences with single parenting; they verbalized a need to reach out to the single parents and their children in the church and in the community, rendering this ministry a valid endeavor. I spoke with all of the single parents, some of the responses were:

“Thank you Rev. Pride. We really need this ministry”.

“I’m not sure if I need to be here I’m a single grandmother, I’ll be back though”.

“I’ll be back to see what this will do to change things”.

In talking with the church members the male participants, of whom there were three the first night, (although only one was a single parent) said the ministry was needed and offered their assistance. These three men were supportive through the entire project process as promised. The other people I spoke to were of the mindset this was just another church ministry that would be non-effective.

The second workshop produced a great deal of feelings in the group. The single parents were very surprised the subject matter of sex was discussed in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

“Rev. Pride, I thought I was the only one not having sex”.

“I hope you have more discussions like this one”.

A church member stated that “I am not a single parent, but I understand a lot of what was talked about tonight. Can I be part of the ministry even though I don’t have children?” This member became quite an asset to the ministry and she created the cover for the community resource book.

Strategy 2:

Two site team members were available for the month of April and May to conduct a bible study. The bible study was offered two months in a row without any participation.

Evaluation:

This unique bible study geared to single parents was announced from the pulpit each Sunday but there was no interest. Evaluating what seemed like a failure, the site team and I surveyed members of the church including, the perspective participants. Two reasons were given for why they did not want another bible study. They didn’t have time

to be at the church another day of the week. The Parkchester Baptist church had bible study on Wednesday and spiritual workshops on Monday. It had been observed the participants were much more receptive to informal discussion sessions. Once this information was collected, the site team and I decided on an alternative—the Cumbayah workshops and meetings would always commence with a minimum of a fifteen-minute interactive bible study focused on single parent families.

A more concerted effort was rendered to advertising. This was done to ascertain if lack of advertising may have contributed to the low numbers of ministry participation. At the end of the project our research concluded that advertising is important; however, more importantly, a single-parent family ministry must be an open ministry. The members should be allowed to attend when they are able. This conclusion is confirmed by a study conducted by Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain, which states:

[t]his study shows that parents generally value informal, personal forms of support more than programmatic supports. This doesn't mean you should stop providing for parents, but the study does suggest that it may be helpful to rethink these programs so that they help parents connect with each other and with people in your congregation."⁵³

Strategy 3:

“How are they to hear without a preacher” (Romans 10:14). D. L. Bartlett, a contributor to the *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, on the authority of preaching: “The sermon has authority because it is intellectually compelling. The preacher is not only interpreter of scripture but commentator on the dilemmas and puzzles of contemporary life...wherein the authority of the sage rests in the ability to see how the

⁵³ Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents, How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004), 8.

world is going and how the structures of the world relate to the wisdom of God.”⁵⁴ I agree whole-heartedly with this statement. The preacher should be the vehicle of providing a forum for the analysis of what is necessary as a people of God to improve conditions for all humanity. I took this portion of the strategies as a tremendous opportunity not only to communicate and inform a large audience, but to use this sacred occasion to make clear to those who were affected by single parenting—including the children—that they are valuable and loved. I was told by a few of the single parents that they had not heard they were of any worth at any time in their life. What a beneficial opportunity to express to the whole congregation that “God is not a respecter of persons” (Romans 2:11).

I preached two sermons, though focused on teaching about the challenges of single parenting, were both pertinent to the human condition many families face in our contemporary, urban community.

ON July 6, 2008 I preached, “Tackling the Tough Times.” The scripture was 1 Kings 17:7-12. The Sunday morning worship service affords an excellent teaching time. I was able to give single-parent statistics and focus the information on the Bronx. Sunday’s at Parkchester Baptist church has 200-225 people.

The scripture is located during a time of a drought in Samaria. The drought affects everyone but it is the disenfranchised the widow and her son that it effects the most. By engaging the congregation it is illustrated how God used this widow (single parent) to give her last to another (the prophet Elijah). The sermon was paramount in clarifying the plight of many single parents and conversely it pointed to the resilience of

⁵⁴ William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 23.

single parents. The sermon afforded the opportunity to reiterate what had been expressed at the first workshop held on March 31, 2008. I was able to go beyond the intellectual, and target the heart of the congregation to appreciate that we may have fallen short in our sensitivity and inclusion of single parents and their children.

July 6, 2008
Parkchester Baptist Church
“Tackling the Tough Times”
Divine Reading-1 Kings 17:7-12
Responsive Reading- John 10:7-10

God’s Word for today opens thusly: “Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.” We enter this text in the time of drought. To give you some background Israel (Northern Kingdom) had enjoyed prosperity for some years under King Ahab, but he marries Jezebel, a Canaanite woman who brings with her worship of Baal, the fertility God. King Ahab builds a temple to Baal in Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Israel continues to worship Yahweh/Jehovah for religious tradition. You know what I mean the laws, eating traditions; Sabbath traditions etc. but they worshipped Baal for rain, prosperity and fertility. Yes they believed in Jehovah God on Sunday but on Monday they looked to their J.O.B., they looked to their paycheck or their Phone, iPod, SUV, DVD, Flat Screen, multimedia state of the art...

Idolatry had become the State religion. I will repeat idolatry had become the State religion. Most everyone thought of their own selfish needs. Wickedness was everywhere. Truth was on the decline. People were living any way they wanted to. Just like today, the people of Israel thought it was all right to worship two Gods. Finally under the influence of Baal worship people began to consult soothsayers and mediums. They no longer consulted God for their guidance. The prophet Elijah in verse 2 of this chapter tells King Ahab, “As the Lord lives, the God of Israel who I serve, there will be no dew or rain in the next few years except at my word”. This will hit King Ahab where it most hurts, economically. A drought will dry up resources. A drought will kill livestock. A drought will destroy crops. A drought will produce dust storms. A drought will produce wild fires. A drought will produce mal-nutrition and dehydration. A drought will produce disease Cholera, Yellow fever, typhoid fever. A drought will produce Social unrest, people die. Look at our world today Look to Africa, the Darfur conflict in neighboring Sudan, look at the devastation, the disease, the death toll. Drought can also mean a time of lack, being without. A time of deficiency, a time of scarcity, a time when there is a shortage of everything.

It's just a "Tough Time."

"And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land". Even Elijah God's servant was having some "Tough Times." Tough times, how many here today have been through some tough times? Yes so have I. So we have some idea of how it feels to be a child of God and yet be in the midst of a drought. Amen. Things happen in our lives that we don't ask for or expect. The Brook is dried up. Yes there is a drought. Circumstances are what they are. It is what it is! There is only one way to live. And that is to surrender yourself to God and listen to the next move God has for you. Sometimes God will lead you even during your "tough times" to open new horizons, new ventures, to provide you with new ways of thinking, new ways of living. "Tough Times/ Times of drought might lead you to help some one in Tackling their tough Times." God told Elijah "Arise, go to Zar'ephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." God was sending Elijah out of Israel to Zarephath a Phoenician Coastal City located about 19 miles South of Sidon (which is now modern Lebanon). God sent Elijah into Gentile country. A country of idol worshippers entrenched in drought and famine and poverty. And what makes it even worst God sends the prophet to a widow (a single parent). The life of a widow was usually a difficult one if the dead husband did not have a brother to marry his widow. Women had no rights to speak of they were considered property. Their rights came through the males of the family. This particular widow had a son. I imagine all her life energy went to keeping her son alive during these tough times in the hope he would grow up and be a support to her. But for now she had to get food however, whenever she could. This single parent in her poverty had No Husband. This single parent in her poverty had No Help. This single parent in her poverty had No Hope.

And along came Elijah: "He called out to this poor single parent picking up some dried up sticks most likely to provide a fire for her last meal. Elijah says" Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink (I know he was confident, for he knew the Lord. But she didn't). Remember there was a drought! She was a poverty stricken, famished single parent who wasn't even an Israelite. She wasn't even a church member. But she starts on her way to get this precious water when Elijah calls her again, "And says bring me, please a piece of bread."

Just for a moment put yourself in this single parent's shoes. Many today, Maybe even in our Church family are single and parenting and are going through tough times. According to "The Bronx an Economic Review," reported by H. Carl McCall, State Comptroller... The Bronx also had the greatest proportion of families headed by a single householder (36%) and the least proportion of married-couple families (31.4%) among the four boroughs outside Manhattan. ...When comparing the number of married-couple families with their own families' children against all families with their own children, the Bronx is the only one among the five boroughs where the majority of these families are headed by a single parent (57.4%)⁵⁵

⁵⁵ McCall, *The Bronx*, 12.

So I imagine someone from that 57.4% might be here today. You may be a single parent mother, You may be a single parent father, You may be a single parent grandmother or grandfather. You may be a single parent aunt or uncle or sister or brother. You may be a single adoptive parent or single foster care parent. You may be a single parent by the death of your spouse. You may be a single parent by the choices you made or you may be a single parent by choices you had no control over. The bottom line is you are a parent and there must be priorities in your life to tackle the tough times.

And so the Widow says to Elijah: “As surely as your God lives, I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we might eat and die!” Have you ever been where she is? That it just seems like there is no hope, no way out, no answer. And just when you think it’s all over..... Elijah says to her, “Don’t be afraid”. Don’t be afraid, Don’t be afraid. Just be obedient... No matter how strange it may seem listen to the small still voice. My sheep know my voice. Single parents don’t be afraid.

The widow listened she set priorities she made the effort: she went home and made the small bread for Elijah and fed him and she fed him first as he asked. Imagine that in all her poverty, her poverty of material goods, her poverty of emotional comfort and her poverty of knowing God she still had enough Faith (It probably was not bigger than a mustard seed the Elijah’s living God could help get her through the tough times.) Elijah had told her of God’s promises. Elijah had given her God’s word. Elijah had given her God’s word of hope and God’s word of truth. Elijah said “For this is what the Lord God of Israel says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the Land’. She believed and she was obedient. God’s provision for this widow through his servant Elijah was: The meal did not cease. Her material needs were met. The oil did not fail. Her spiritual needs were met. God’s provision was enough, God shall supply all our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus”.(Phil 4:19-20 RSV). Elijah was able to help this widow, this single parent going through tough. Elijah too was blessed for he took the opportunity to seek out this single parent. Now both of them understood what Paul was able to articulate in the New Testament in Philippians; “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:10-13 RSV).

How many Know that they know that they can do all things through Christ who gives them strength. It’s true for it is one of God’s promises. Maybe you haven’t been given the opportunity to speak with someone going through the tough times. Maybe you haven’t spoken to someone sick, or elderly, or young, or single, or single parenting, or having marital problems or someone just going through tough times.

Well I'm asking you today to reach out to these people especially those within our Church family. Then go out on the highways and byways and extend a hand to the world. Look what happened when Elijah went out into the world and touched a widow and shared his faith he was blessed in the midst of the drought. The word of God says: "So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and for her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. How do we tackle the tough times? We speak the Word of God we read the Word of God, We live the word of God, We reach out with the word of God We walk the Word of God We have the word of God in our hearts. Jesus said in John 10:10 "I have come that they might have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Go out and tell God's children, all of God's children, that we belong to one family. That we will embrace and love each other because God told us to. Once we walk through the Gate. Once we walk through the door once we accept Jesus God looks at each of us as sons and daughters. Embrace each other Church. Don't look at divisions. Trust God like Elijah. Like the widow to work out the tough times. God's power is all the power you need. Believe God to take care of your household. Believe God to take care of your relationships, Believe God to take care of your finances. God is our Jehovah-Jireh our most perfect provider. Tackling the tough times Jesus says; "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30 RSV). Amen."⁵⁶

Ms. X- "That sermon touched my heart. When is your next meeting"?

Rev. P- Cumbayah meets every second and fourth Sunday after church. We look forward to seeing you.

Mr. S- "I didn't know there were single parents in the bible".

Rev. P- "There are many different types of family styles in the bible, single parents are just one".

Mr. D- "I am glad you are talking about it. And you talked about men being single parents too".

Rev. P- "Come out to the workshops, maybe you can help some of the other men with your testimonies and wisdom".

⁵⁶ Rev. Judy Pride, "Tackling the Tough Times," sermon delivered at Parkchester Baptist Church, July 6, 2008.

Mr. S- “I will when I can”.

After the first sermon the awareness of the church was beginning to be kindled. Interest was increasing.

The second sermon was delivered on November 30, 2008. It was entitled “Given Back”, and the scripture text was the gospel of Luke 7:11-15. The scripture begins with Jesus’ heart going out to a woman who is at the funeral of her dead son. Jesus tells her “don’t cry”. In the Lord’s compassion he touches the coffin of the dead son and tells the young man to “get up.” Jesus gives back the son to his mother. This sermon allowed a time to ponder not only what the Lord had given back to each and everyone in the sanctuary, but what we as a Church family can do to give back to individuals including single parents, children, and the community. Albor Ruiz a reporter from the New York Daily News writes: According to the Food Bank,

As of 2007, more than one out of every five children (397,000) in New York City relies on soup kitchens and food pantries, up 48% from 269,000 in 2004. Yet while need grows across the city, government support and funding diminishes and more families are being turned away at soup kitchens and food pantries.⁵⁷

The penetrating question for the Church was: “do we respond to the cry of those in the church?” In November the Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry had been in the Church for eight months. At times I was able to list how the church had begun to reach out. The Church started by clipping food coupons, donating snacks for our meetings, offering services such as helping with the children during meetings. The Church was about to start a food pantry. It was a time I could commend the Church for embracing the single parent families and encouraged them corporately to continue.

⁵⁷ Albor Ruiz, “Economic Crisis Same Old for City’s Poor,” NY Daily News; <http://personals.nydailynews.com> (accessed November 20,2008).

November 30, 2008
Parkchester Baptist Church
“GIVEN BACK”
LUKE 7:11-15
Responsive reading: 2 Kings 4:1-7

“GIVEN BACK”

As I struggled with this word it became quite apparent what I wanted to say was not what God had for you today. I wanted a feel good praise Word. God wants a serious Word delivered in Spirit and Truth. God wants me to tell you my beloved that it is already GIVEN Back! I will repeat this once again God wants me to tell you it is already GIVEN BACK. Turn to your neighbor and say GIVEN BACK. NOW take a moment and think about what The Lord has given back to you.

The Word of God says in our focus verses Luke 7:13-15

When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and he said don't cry.” Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still.

He said “Young man, I say to you, get up. The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother!

What has Jesus given back to you? What had Jesus restored?

In the midst of this season of thanksgiving have you taken time from your busy schedule and reflected on what Jesus has resurrected in your life, your family, your job, your school, your relationships, you're Church. Still I dare say there are those even here at Parkchester Baptist Church that may seem excluded and God is going to use the rest of us to give back to them as well.

The book of Acts tells us in the early Church when the number of disciples were multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Deacons or servants of God were designated to help provide for the widows. The word widow in Hebrew was pronounce al-maw-naw it literally means empty house. This meaning helps us understand better what a widow feels when she loses her spouse by death. Bible text does not limit widow just to older women, the term is inclusive of women of all ages and since there was no birth control at that time most widows had children. These widows were single parents, just like in our Church today there are widows and single parents that find themselves challenged by their life condition. Whether it be by divorce or childbirth outside of marriage the emphasis on the Word of God is compassion. The word of God in Zechariah 7:10 says “Oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart”

James the brother of Jesus writes in 1:27 Religion that pleases God the Father must be and spotless. You must help the needy orphans and widows and not let this world make you evil.” (CEV)

In a Daily News article written by Alber Ruiz he states from a report released by the NYC's food bank...from the period from 2003-2007, basic living cost in the metro area increased as follows: food by 15%, fuel and utilities by 37%, housing by 18%

medical care by 17% and transportation by 14%. He goes on later in the article to say...from a report on child hunger...found that the number of city households with children found it difficult to afford food grew by 41% and now reaches a whopping 45%. According to the food bank as of 2007 more than one out of every 5 children (397,000) in New York relies on soup kitchens and food pantries.

According to the census bureau recordings of 2006. There are approximately 14 million single parents in the United States. 835 are single mothers and 16% are single fathers. These single parents are responsible for 21.6 million children.

Well preacher why do you bring this up now?

Because Jesus heard the widows cry. Do we respond to the cry Parkchester? Jesus in His compassion and love saw this woman and felt her grief. He reached out brought her son back to life, brought her hope for survival into reality, gave her a hope for a future because her husband's name would go on to the next generation, erased her loneliness, for her son would be physically with her, and showed her the favor of a God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is in work in us. (Ephesians 3:20)

Today's single parents grieve as well. It may be because of the death of a spouse, it may be because of a divorce, it may be because of abandonment, it may be because of the stress of every day life and particularly during today's financial crisis, threat or loss of employment, high rents, and it may be a difficult child or children.

How do we as a Church family help these parents know that Jesus has given back, has restored them, has made them new creatures because Jesus is in their hearts working out the details. See what he does in the scripture: He said, "Don't cry." All Jesus had to do was speak. His words were power. You know what I'm talking about;

Jesus calmed to raging storm with the words peace be still. His word crushed demons. His word healed. His word brought Lazarus back to life. He said to the woman don't cry and then He spoke to her dead son and get up and brought him to life.

Don't cry! Get Up! Jesus turned death into life, turned the darkness of mourning into the light of joy.

You see beloved we are in crisis. Too many of us are choosing the option of death. Too many are walking this community and in this Church full of indifference, low self-esteem, lack of self-worth, instead of walking with pride and wanting nothing but the best for their lives. They have allowed the pressures of this world to overpower them and they believe the hype that they are less than other people. Church just as the mother needed her son for her survival we need everyone here no matter their family configuration to get up, be revived, be renewed and restored. For Christ has already given back to us what has been taken we just have to accept it.

Church, open your hearts as Christ has and be the eyes and hands of Christ in this Church family.

Let go of your prejudices about Single Parents. From the very beginning, it was established by God that men and women would be responsible for the rearing and teaching of the children of this world.

While contemporary parenting may look different God still looks on them with compassion and says, "don't cry," don't worry, don't fear, don't give up, give me your cares, put your burdens on me. I will give you peace in the midst of your storms. Believe what I say. He has already Given Back' Receive it!

Earlier I asked this Church do we respond to the cry?

How do we help single parents to know Jesus has given back?

I believe we are beginning through ministries such as Cambayah single parent ministries these parents have a forum to discuss and become part of the process of helping each other. Our whole Church family has reached out in teaching, and giving suggestions for the ministry, giving coupons to defray the cost of food and other items. Our Faith Fellowship Partners will be joined with our single parents to lend a listening ear, emotional support when needed and of most importance prayer. We as a Church family have an after school program, BYF girl scouts and the Fellas that is geared especially to young men.

We are starting a food pantry that will meet the needs of not only our single parents but our congregation as well.

This is what the word of God means Deuteronomy. 24:19-21 “If you forget to bring in a stack of harvested grain, don’t go back in the field to get it. Leave it for the poor, including orphans and widows, and the Lord will make you successful in everything you do.”

In closing our responsive reading the prophet Elisa told the widow who was about to loose her sons to slavery because of debt left by her now dead husband.

Like the widow we all have needs. But God knows our needs he says don’t worry about tomorrow. He knows all about you and me. We are all broken earthen jars and God has healed the brokenness. Take a moment and think back from whence you came. Use what God has GIVEN Back Take the oil you already have. Just like the widow was told to do. For the oil is precious. Trust God to multiply the oil and he will. Don’t limit God and God won’t limit you.

Yesterday we learned to hold on to your fork from the drama ministry, (Faith Obedience restores you to the King). And we learned that a family that prays together stays together.

Lets pray Church for we are family made up of many configurations all loved by God for we are all God’s children and part of the Royal family brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus. For God so loved the World, that is you, and I, that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. As a family, today Parkchester, won’t you accept his example and show your love and compassion open your hearts to all that come through this door. Jesus has already Given back. Now it’s our turn!! Amen”⁵⁸

Ms. A- “I learned a lot from your sermons about what I can do to help single parents”.

Mrs. Elder-“If you need money. I would like to help”.

Mr. B- “I will do anything you need to help the ministry succeed”.

⁵⁸ Rev. Judy Pride, “ Given Back” sermon delivered at Parkchester Baptist Church, November 30,2008.

Ms. D- “The sermon excited me so much, I would like to do a workshop, I’m nervous but I want to do it, do you think I can”.

Rev. P. – “Of course I think you can do it. Come to my office and I will tell you some things you need to learn. I will also let you speak to someone in Christian Ed.”.

Ms. D. “Thank you. I know I can do it with all of your help. No one ever trusted me before”.

Rev. P – “Not only do I trust you. I know the workshop is going to be great, because you are great”.

Evaluation:

Regrettably I was only able to do two of the three sermons. Preaching assignments are in the jurisdiction of the Pastor and the Pastor’s schedule. Due to a change in her schedule that allowed her to be in the Church more Sundays and the increase in the ministry staff my preaching was limited. I learned that it doesn’t really matter how many sermons you preach. The importance of preaching is to be as effective as you can every occasion you get to speak from the Word of God to the people of God. This was an immense learning experience for me. I learned I was not guaranteed preaching time and when I preach, preach as if I would never preach again.

The congregation was very receptive; many stated that they didn’t realize they were ignoring or excluding the single parents. One member said, “they look ‘happy’ I thought they didn’t need anything.” This particular church member began to assist with the children during workshops and at the end of the project was a committed member of the ministry.

Strategy 4:

On May 25th I preached to the young people from 2 Kings 22: 1-13 the sermon title was “God can use anybody!!! Why not you?” The text explains how God used eight-year-old Josiah to become king of Judah. The major purpose of this sermon was to reach the youth of the Church. A small synopsis of the sermon is as follows: Is there anyone here today who is eight years old? I want you to know today that God can use anybody!! Why not you? God has great things in store for your life all you have to do is listen to your parents, go to school and reach for the heights. The bible says you are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26 KJV) and you are wonderfully and marvelously made (Psalm 139:14 KJV). Do not believe anyone who tells you are anything less. The sermon also dealt with the difficulties that can be in families as Josiah, father king Amnon didn’t serve the Lord and his mother Jedidah did. In the midst of adversity within his home he was able to achieve great things.

Rev. Judy DavisAls-Pride

Parkchester Baptist Church
May 25, 2008

Divine Reading 2 Kings 22:1-13

Sermon Title: God can use anybody!!! Why not you?

INTRODUCTION

So today I would like to share with the young people of Parkchester Baptist Church some of the young people God used in the bible. In the Divine reading for today which opens with remarkable words Josiah was eight years old when he became king of Judah, and he ruled thirty-one years from Jerusalem.

Is there anyone here today who is eight years old? I want you to know today that God can use anybody!! Why not you??? God has great things in store for your life all you have to do is follow God's ways, listen to your parents, go to school and reach for the heights. The bible says you are made in God's image and you are wonderfully and marvelously made. Do not believe anyone who tells you are anything less.

Many of us and especially our young people believe that will never amount to anything because their parents may not have ambition, or achieved great status, or have a lot of money. Society tells our youth many who come from one parent homes, or dysfunctional homes, or abusive homes that because of their circumstances they will fail in life. But God tells us something radically different. God tells us I can use you!!! All you have to do is want to be used by God and not the world.

Eight year old king Josiah is a good example. The bible says Josiah's mother was Jedidah and he always obeyed the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. Josiah didn't follow his father King Amon, or Grandfather King Manasseh.

The bible says in chapter 21 of 2 Kings that Manasseh worshipped pagan gods and the stars in the temple where the Lord was to be worshipped King Manasseh practiced magic and witchcraft and sacrificed his own son (2 Kings 21:6-7 RSV). He was guilty of causing the people of Judah to sin and disobey the Lord. He refused to protect innocent people. He even let so many of them be killed their blood filled the streets of Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:16 RSV). He did many things to make God angry. Josiah's father continued this evil practice.

But 8 year old King Josiah did not let his family stop him from going forward, even though in a household like this childish innocence is soon lost. Josiah must have witnessed all sorts of wickedness, deceit treachery, injustice, meanness, murder and hatred. He looked for someone to be like and he chose King David who was not perfect but loved the Lord with all of his heart and repented of his sins.

In the midst of all the negativity of his life, at sixteen Josiah began to demonstrate a genuine commitment to God (2 Chron 34:3a RSV) in the eight years he was king Josiah was studying, learning about God. Is there anyone sixteen here today.

At twenty He stopped all the worship of idols in Judah (2 Chron 34:3b RSV). So listen carefully all of you young adults. Josiah launched an aggressive reformation/

reorganizing/ or restructuring in Judah. He restored true worship of Jehovah God. Josiah began to help others understand who God was. The book of the law was found after having been lost for some commentaries say approximately 80 years while doing temple repairs. When the book of Deuteronomy was read to Josiah and he realized how far his people were from doing the right thing in God's eyes. He was extremely fearful. He called the people together and the covenant with God was renewed. The people were committed to "walk after the Lord." To be obedient, sincere and pure in their worship. To keep God's commandments and they were committed to keep the word of God as their final authority. Josiah revived the celebration of Passover.

The bible says "There had never been a king like him before, who served the Lord with all his heart, mind and strength, obeying all the laws of Moses, nor has there been a king like him since" 2Kings 23:25

The bottom line I'm trying to tell you today is No matter what age God can use you to do extraordinary things if you just let God.

I know it is not easy. There are a few things you must try and do.

First of all like Josiah you must be humble and obedient. Even though I told you are great and will do marvelous and extraordinary things you must stay humble... Don't be arrogant and mean and act better than others. Be humble of spirit/ be gentle of spirit. Listen to those that are giving you advice. Look for role models. There are people in the church who are willing to mentor you. Don't be ashamed to ask for help. God says you do not receive because you did not ask! Be obedient. Be obedient. God will direct your path. Remember if it is God telling you to do something it feels good inside there is a peace about the decision. It will never hurt anyone. It will always build them up. Listen to your parents/ respect your elders and respect each other. Be honest, don't lie. Be generous with your time. Help each other. When you stumble or things get difficult pull each other up. You see from Josiah's life that it is possible to be faced with obstacles in your life, to come from a troubled family and still excel in life. It is very possible to be young black or Hispanic and be serious about loving God. I know that because I have been privileged to teach the young new members who want to be baptized.

And here is the thing that many of our young people don't believe and I dare say many of our older members don't believe God can use one person to make a difference even though that person may find help in other persons it is the one person stepping out of the box. Forget about peer pressure, forget about what people will say, forget about people calling you different, forget about friends laughing at you and just be obedient to God and God can use you to influence others to change the world.

These words the Lord spoke to young Prophet Jeremiah "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations". The Lord spoke to the teenage Mary through the angel Gabriel; the angel said, "don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. The Lord God will make him great as his ancestor David was".

And finally the bible says this about Jesus our Lord and savior at twelve years old. "After Passover his parents left but they did not know that Jesus had stayed in the city. They thought he was traveling with some other people and they went the whole day before they started looking for him. Three days later they found Jesus sitting in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions. When his parents found him

they were amazed. His mother said son why have you done this. Your father and I were worried.

Twelve Year old Jesus answered” Why did you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I must be about my Father’s business? The final verse in that chapter of Luke 2 says Jesus became wise and grew strong. God was pleased with him so were the people.

For those of you here today that may not know our Baptist youth fellowship’s name has been changed to about my Father’s business. And our young people are. We also have a young adult ministry and they are also about our father’s business and our youth church is learning and being groomed to know what it means to be about our fathers business. God is pleased with all our children and so are we the people.

God can and will use anybody. Why not our wonderful children? Won’t you help them be all that God has created them to be? Amen.⁵⁹

This lesson was achieved by this sermon along and my discussions of Moses that followed a video presentation of an animated version of “The Ten Commandments”⁶⁰ in the next two sessions of children Church. I discussed with the children that Moses’ mother had to give him up and he was adopted into Pharaoh’s house. These next two children church session gave me a solid foundation.

I asked the children how many only lived with one parent. Ten of the fifteen children present raised their hands or 66% of the children’s church. I used myself as a conduit to open the dialogue in a non-threatening atmosphere. I told the children my mother left me and my brothers and sisters as children and how much I missed her. The children were very animated; hands were raised to speak before I could ask a question. Some of the children responses were: I miss my dad, he doesn’t even call; I don’t know if my dad is dead or alive; I only visit my mother on the week-end, I get to see my baby brother then; sometimes I wish I lived with them, but I don’t want to leave my grandmother alone.

⁵⁹ Rev. Judy Pride, “God Can Use Anybody!!! Why Not You?” sermon delivered at the Parkchester Baptist Church May 25, 2008.

⁶⁰ Bill Boyce, *The Ten Commandments*, DVD, (Santa Monica, California: Genius Productions, Promenade Pictures, 2006).

The children were allowed to share as much as they wanted. The session had to be divided into two because there was so much inner turmoil the children needed to express. Many subjects were discussed—gangs, jealousy, racism (some of the children went to predominately Caucasian schools)—to name a few. The heartfelt subject of single parenting was the paramount issue. One five year-old child raised his hand and it took some time for me to acknowledge him. But his words still pierce my heart. “[h]e said, “my dad disturbs me, he just disturbs me, disturbs me”. Clearly these forums were cathartic for our children who very seldom have a forum to express the frustrations of their lives. Their feelings were honored and not judged. We promised the sessions were private which allowed the children to speak freely and ensured their feeling safe. Consequently, Children’s Church became a “Safe Haven” for the children. It served a twofold purpose, first, spiritual healing, and then, emotional healing.

Evaluation:

We were not able to have further sermons. The Sunday School Superintendent was unable to preach her sermons due to the fact Children’s Church was suspended for several months. The time we did have with the children was invaluable to

1. build trust with the children
2. Increase the children feeling the church is a safe haven
3. allow them to verbalize their feelings and anxiety
4. foster an atmosphere of support
5. Help build there self esteem by positive reinforcement
6. Letting them know there are people who listen to them

These Church school sessions enabled to be of assistance to the single parent families in concrete ways by reaching out to the different ministries in the church that could help—for example, going to court with a parent. We were able to follow-up with the children to show a consistent support system in their lives.

Strategy 5:

Using the books *How to Equip the African American Family* by Drs. George and Yvonne Abatso⁶¹ and *Family Ties* by Rev. Cheryl P. Clemetson, PhD. and Evangeline Carey.⁶² I led Vacation Bible School for three days. We had an intergenerational discussion and interaction on:

1. Today's African American Family.
2. Two Parent Families
3. Single Parent Families
4. Parent

Vacation Bible school is held during summer vacation in the evening to provide an intergenerational bible study. “*Equipping the African American Family*” Vacation Bible School was held July 9, 10, and 11, 2008. Vacation Bible School gave the ministry a broader audience, as people were involved that ordinarily did not come out for Cumbayah workshops. Along with my site team it was decided we would involve as many ministries of the church as possible in the process which would inform a larger portion of our congregation about the challenges of families, parenting and finally single

⁶¹ Drs. George & Yvonne Abatso, *African American Family: Issues And Guidelines For Building Strong Families* (Chicago: Urban Ministries, 1991), 19-31, 43-55, 69-83.

⁶² Rev. Cheryl P. Clemetson and Evangeline Carey, *Family Ties, Restoring Unity in the African American Family* (Chicago: Urban Ministries, 2006), iv-vii.

parent families. We relied heavily on word of mouth in addition to our other forms of advertising.

The ministries we invited to be involved were the Ministerial Ministry, the Deacon Ministry, Technology Ministry, the Christian Education Ministry, the Drama Ministry A.C.T.S. (Acting Christians Teaching Scripture), the Mission's Ministry, the Young Adult Ministry and the project site team. Each ministry was given an assignment for each of the three-day bible presentation. This was done to motivate their participation, increase their enthusiasm, educate them and empower them to express what they experienced. The church was encouraged to participate from the pulpit by the Pastor. The workshops were conducted in the fellowship hall.

A snack was provided each night by the Christian education ministry. Fifteen adults and four children (ages 8-10) attended the first night of Vacation Bible School, our subject was "Parenting African American Children."

All sessions were opened with a time for quiet reflection and release of the day's stress. This was done by playing a gospel song related to the subject matter for the evening.

"Never would have made it" by Marvin Sapp is a musical selection that begins with the lyrics: "Never would have made it, never would have made it, without you. I would have lost it all but now I see how you were there for me".⁶³ Prayer followed and a reading was led responsively by the entire group "Family"⁶⁴ this same responsive reading was used for the first and last nights.

⁶³ Marvin Sapp, *Never Would Have Made It*, CD, Verity, 2007.

⁶⁴ Rev. Dr. Delores Carpenter et al. eds., *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001), 11.

The evening consisted of a case study discussion with questions and group work. Provided from the book: *How to Equip the African American Family, Issues and Guidelines for Building Strong Families* by Dr. George and Yvonne Abatso.⁶⁵

Five adult bible study discussion groups were formed:

Group#1- Eli, Hopni and Phineas (1Samuel 2:12, 17, 22; 4:11, 18)

Discuss Eli's problem of relating his religious life to his parenting and comparing Eli's problem of relating his religious life to his parenting and comparing Eli's parenting to modern parenting.

Group#2- Elkanah, Hannah and Samuel (1Samuel 1:1-2, 20, 24, 26-28; 2:11, 26)

Discuss different ways to infuse African American history into Christian education of children.

Group #3-Samuel, Joel, and Abiah (1Samuel 8:1-5; 9:15-17)

Discuss how parenting styles are passed from one generation to the next.

Group #4 – Saul and Jonathan (1Samuel 19:1-2, 4, 6; 20:30-33)

Group #5- David, Amnon, Absalom and Tamar (2 Samuel 3:2-3; 13:1, 6, 10-12, 14, 20, 23, 28-29 37, 39) Discuss David's sexuality, immorality and its effect on his children.

Group #6-(Children's Group) Discuss and draw what comes to mind to your mind when you hear the word GANG.

Drawing was found to be an excellent tool for the children. Jerold Apps' comments concurred with this hypothesis: "Learners are accustomed to expressing themselves with words, but sometimes, important ideas or feelings are best expressed in

⁶⁵ Abatso, *How to Equip the African American Family*, 91-117.

other ways. Drawing is one way to do that. Drawings also help learners discover elements about themselves that they didn't know were there.⁶⁶

Each group was required to have a recorder and a reporter. Newsprint was hung and the responses were hung on bulletin boards and remained for the entire three sessions for quick referral throughout.

There were many responses that evening I will give you a few from group #2, 3 and 6. Their suggestions for infusing African American history into Christian education were:

Establish a curriculum encompassing ancestry, ethnicity and values.

- Seek out the wisdom of the elders of the family (both biological and the church).
- Bring/accompany our family (children especially) to Sunday school and worship services.
- Participate as a family in extra-curricular Christ-centered Activity and family devotion at home.
- Bible study for youth
- Tutoring for academics
- Mentoring

Group #3 Felt parenting styles were passed from generation to generation by:

- Parents behavior
- Having a live-in boyfriend or girl friend
- Immoral life style
- Having a boyfriend that doesn't have a job.

⁶⁶ Apps, *Mastering the Teaching of Adults*, 73.

- Mother not married
- Generational welfare
- Being too permissive
- Not knowing what activities your children are involved in

Group #6 the children who were supervised by the Young adult ministry stated: when they hear the word GANG they are:

- Scared
- They see them sometimes
- Sometimes they are afraid to talk about them to their parents
- They are at school
- Killing

These questions, feelings and drawings generated a great deal of discussion and enlightenment within the group. The group was asked to read the scriptures that they may not have read during the workshop at home. We closed in a circle with prayer.

Eighteen adults and one child attended the second evening. The topic was “Today’s African American Family.” The format was the same we began with a Jazz selection *Christo Redentor* by Donald Byrd for quiet reflection.⁶⁷ Prayer and the responsive reading was *Marriage*.⁶⁸

A Case study was presented; discussion and group work again was taken from: *How to Equip the African American Family, Issues and Guidelines for Building Strong Families* by Drs. George and Yvonne Abatso⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Donald Byrd, *Cristo Redentor*, CD, New York: Blue Note Records, 1963.

⁶⁸ Carpenter et al., *African American Heritage Hymnal*, 32.

⁶⁹ Abatso, *How to Equip the African American Family*, 23-37.

Group #1- A family changing. (Ruth 1:1-18)

Over the years, the structure of Elimelech's family changed, describe the changes and compare the changes to today's modern family.

Group#2- Pressures and the family. (Ruth 1:1-5)

Describe what Elimelech's family faced and explain how the pressures of their problems impacted on family life. What are the pressures impacting the black family today? How do we address these issues as church family?

Group#3- The Extended Family- Stress Absorber #1

(Ruth 1:4-7, 1:16-18, 2:5-20, 4:9-13, 4:14-17)

There are five instances of the extended family serving as a resource—explain. Give ways in which we can use our extended families to help when needed.

(1:4-7, 1:16-18, 2:5-20, 4: 9-13, 4:14-17).

Group #4- A relationship with the Lord. Stress Absorber #2

There are four instances in which Elimelech's family was flexible. Explain.

(1:1-4, 1:6, 2:5-7, 4:9-10)

In what specific ways can our church develop ministries and activities to meet the needs of non-traditional family structures?

(Single Parents, widows, blended families, extended families, couples without children).

Describe how Black families are becoming flexible in order to deal with these pressures.

Group #5- This was the children's group supervised by the Young adult ministry.

Draw and explain who is in your family.

A sample of the evening's discussion produced these responses.

Group #4 Expressed that:

- Naomi was committed to the Lord.
- Ruth decided to follow Naomi and since Naomi believed in the Lord so did Ruth.
- Ruth was a Moabite and that didn't stop her from following the Lord. As a Moabite, Ruth was not allowed to worship God.
- Everything Ruth and Naomi did was in God's plan.
- In our family you must have faith. Once you have faith you will receive God's blessings.

STRESS ABSORBERS

- God is our stress Absorber
- Faithfulness
- Kindness-Boaz
- Integrity
- Protection
- Blessings

Group #5- Suggested that as a church we could provide these ministries to meet the needs of family to be inclusive of our non-traditional families

- Latch Key program for children after school
- Increase the ministry The Fellows that is an outreach to young boys.
- Re-start Rites of passage ministry for girls
- Support our Girl scouts
- Start a Singles Ministry

The third evening was our final evening. It was set-up as a dinner theater. We had thirty-two adults including my N.Y.T.S. advisor Rev. Dr. Nancy Fields. There were

five children. The use of the drama ministry was an extremely effective teaching method. The play presented the struggles of single parenting as written, directed and performed by Parkchester Baptist members. We opened with a time for quiet reflection with “Lean on Me” by Kirk Franklin.⁷⁰ We had prayer and the responsive reading was repeated from the first night, *Family*.

Dinner was served family style at each table. During the entire VBS and the Cumbayah Single Parent Family Ministry the family atmosphere was fostered at every opportunity to provide a safe haven for the families. Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain suggest:

A safe Haven for Parents because many parents are going it alone and feel overwhelmed, your congregation can become a place of safety and refuge for parents. Your congregation can affirm parents in what they’re already doing right and recharge their batteries so they can fulfill their important role. Parents find safety when a congregation accepts their current situation and helps them to make the most of that situation. This evening the drama ministry of Parkchester Baptist Church performed an inter-active play focused on the challenges of single parenting.⁷¹

The drama presentation for the evening chose humor to depict the concerns of one-parent homes and showcased the different configurations of one parent family that we seldom consider—those being single father and single grandparent. The evening was inter-active with multiple opportunities for the audience to be involved with understanding and discussing many critical issues.

⁷⁰ Kirk Franklin, *Lean On Me*, CD, Pacoima, California: Zomba\Verity Records , 1998.

⁷¹ Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 8-9.

Evaluation:

At the completion of the project the Vacation bible school was found to be the most effective of the strategies in increasing the awareness of the congregation. It was established that:

1. Several teaching methods were utilized attracting a wider audience.
2. The workshops were inter-generational
3. The workshops were inter-active
4. The workshops had several components reducing boredom
5. The workshops were non judgmental
6. The work shops provided a family atmosphere
7. Food was served for nourishment
8. It was the first time the single parents could articulate feelings to the church community.

Of the thirty-seven participants (including children), 20 evaluations or 54% were returned in rating VBS excellent, good or poor, 15 rated the sessions excellent and five rated them good.

Some of the responses were:

”I learned that single parents often experience the same struggles no matter their age or gender”.

“I learned how much more we need to do for families”.

“The discussion about single families was very informative. I just hope we can generate these words into action”.

“I learned more about family styles”.

“Knowing someone cares about the issues of raising a child on your own”.

“Searching the scripture to show how those people in their times dealt with the needs in the family”.

At the conclusion of the project our goal was met by having at least 10% of the church verbalize a change in preconceived ideas regarding single parents.

The evaluations also allowed participants to suggest ways of assisting and or strengthening families. Ideas that were agreed upon by the group were:

1. Formulating a community resource book
2. Create an area with employment listings
3. Start a food pantry
4. Emergency baby-sitting
5. Mentoring
6. Just to become more involved
7. The church should increase its support
8. Doing more for the children
9. Increasing communication
10. Having more workshops

The goal of 20% of the vacation bible school participants to be able to articulate suggestions to strengthen family ties was met as 20 respondents or 54% gave suggestions. We were successful in our final goal of 10% of the single parents feeling more connected to the church and will feel free to verbalize their feelings. Of the 37 participants, 11 were single parents, 5 were children, and 21 were our traditional church family. Each of the single parents voiced feeling better about their connection and felt more comfortable

talking about their lives and concerns. This goal was met 100%. In addition the children became more empowered vocalizing their desire for more activities geared toward them because there is no place for them to go after school. It was concluded VBS was a great success in raising awareness in the church.

Goal # 2:

To recruit and train members of the Parkchester Baptist was accomplished by the following strategies: three site team members, which included the Chair-Person of the Christian Education Ministry, identified members of the Parkchester Baptist Church that were willing to Participate in researching the community resources, in addition to leading workshops. A survey was given to ascertain the willingness of congregants to mentor, teach a workshop or volunteer for child-care. Approximately 125 were surveyed 25 or 20% of those surveyed responded with positive intentions to become actively involved in the Cumbayah ministry training. This was done within the allotted time frame of March-July. The Chairperson of the Christian Education Ministry recruited members from this pool of respondents that had expertise in social work, law enforcement, education, community affairs, social justice and health. At the culmination of the project we had utilized 24% of these willing workers. We had 6 membership-led workshops.

Evaluation:

Interest and enthusiasm increased in the congregation as the ministry enlarged and information was disseminated throughout the congregation. It was discovered after vacation bible school that the congregation had a greater understanding of the challenges of single parenting and wanted to be involved. This was due to the fact that a larger

segment of the church population had actively been involved in discussing issues and had begun to incorporate transforming ideas into church conversation regarding family, and single parent family in particular. Jerold Apps maintains that adult learning is:

- Accumulation of information
- Change in behavior
- Improved performance or proficiency
- Change in Knowledge, attitudes, and skills
- A new sense of meaning
- Cognitive restructuring
- Personal transformation⁷²

At the completion of the project there was an intentional focus on three of Apps learning points.

Change of behavior

Church members were willing to come forth and volunteer in the ministry:

1. Assisting with the children activities.
2. Assisting during the summer Saturday respite for the children.
3. Bringing donations such as snacks, coupons to help defray the cost of food.
4. Books for the children to read.
5. Attending workshops/sharing wisdom, for example members of the mothers and elders ministry.

Change in knowledge, attitude and skills

A few final responses to the project from Church members are as follows:

A retiree said: “I learned some of the difficulties that single parents are faced with. Now I would like to share some of my time, and help single parents with their children”.

A single woman stated: “I learned about the breakdown of different families. I am available to help keep the children”.

⁷² Apps, *Mastering The Teaching of Adults*, 34.

A mother/elder of the church wrote: “I have increased awareness of the needs of the single parent in our church family. I would like to be an asset either by actually ‘doing’ or supporting the groups/ministries that do.”

A young male exclaimed: “I just love being here. I want to come all the time”.

Personal transformation

One of the church congregants, who have been inactive for several years, was motivated by coming to VBS to write a proposal for an afternoon program for the youth. It is named Recreational Educational After-School Program. The Pastor accepted the proposal. R.E.A.P. had its debut in the fall of 2008 as an afternoon tutoring program. Several other members who were not active in a church ministry became actively involved in ministries that supported the children of the Church—many whom are members of single parent families. One such person stated: “I realize now how difficult it is for single grand-parents. I have learned ways to help them. I will devote my time and energy to be a mentor to young children in the community and the church”. This member became an assistant in the Children’s church in October.

The American Heritage dictionary defines *transformed* as to change, to change markedly in form or appearance, to change in nature or condition, to convert.⁷³ In interviews conducted by the site team and myself Church members that participated in activities of Cumbayah were markedly transformed. The transformation was observed by their willingness to serve. By the project’s end, the culture of Parkchester Baptist Church had been transformed. Single parents in the church are no longer invisible. The

⁷³s.v. “transformed,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

Cumbayah single Parent Ministry had been empowered enough to thrive with its own leadership.

Rev. P. – “I am so proud of you. You appear to have it together”.

Ms. X. – “I Struggle every day. Being single with children can be discouraging at times”.

Rev. P. – “I’m wondering how you cope”.

Ms. X. – “This church and Cumbayah has been a blessing. I have support. I have made friendships to help with my children. I’ve learned a lot and I want to help somebody else”.

Ms. X is one of the women who struggled to stay in the new member’s class three years ago. Cumbayah became an official ministry of the PBC in January 2009 and Ms. X is the chair.

Strategy 2 was altered as it was decided that the church had enough member resources that the ministry would not bring in speakers from other organizations. Further, our supposition was that finances should not prevent the formation or development of a ministry. Many ministry beginnings have been delayed because the originators felt they needed large sums of money and church collections. This ministry had none of those options. This gave us the opportunity to be innovative as well as frugal. Our speakers volunteered and considered leading a workshop a labor of love.

We not only achieved the goal to have four workshops led by member speakers, but exceeded the number and had a waiting list of speakers at the time of completion of the project. The Christian education or the ministerial staff trained the speakers. All the trainers were part of the project site team. Consequently, this made them proficient in

interacting, sensitive to the parents and their children, and communicating that knowledge to our speakers.

The first workshop on May 18th had 13 participants, took place in the midst of turmoil in the city. The Black community had once again been the victim of a killing of a Black young man by the city's law enforcers. However, the officers were acquitted. A New York Times article on the incident reports:

Three detectives were found not guilty Friday on all charges in the shooting death of Sean bell, who died in a hail pf 50 police bullets out side a club in Jamaica, Queens, in November 2006. The verdict prompted calls for calm from the mayor, angry promises of protests by those speaking for the Bell family and expressions of relief by the detectives.⁷⁴

Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain state in a survey conducted by them when it came to trusting professionals for advice: “

What kind of advice do parents want? When asked in an open-ended question, the three most common responses parents gave were:

1. How to understand and deal with teenagers,
2. How to have patience and understanding with their children; and
3. Opportunities to learn from parents who have been in similar situations.⁷⁵

When the same question was asked of the single parents at the Parkchester Baptist Church. The answers given were:

1. Keep my child safe
2. Keep my children safe
3. Keep my son safe

⁷⁴ Michael Wilson, “3 Detectives Acquitted in Bell Shooting,” *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/26/nyregion/26BELL.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=sean%20bell&st=cse (accessed December 21, 2008).

⁷⁵ Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 74.

It was in this context that our first speaker was chosen—she was a police officer, mother of a teenage son, and single. She was able to be the channel for our anxious parents to express their fears and anger. Her presentation allowed the participants to discuss the law enforcement position, parent's position, and finally what was perceived to be the children's apprehension. We had also invited the mothers/elders of the church to attend this meeting. Their attendance was quite an asset as they were able to give sage advice and offer their spiritual and emotional support.

Regretfully, we did not include the children in this forum. Nor did it occur to us to give them an opportunity to express their feelings personally in a forum. This was due to two reasons.

1. It was early in the program and I was still navigating the needs of the single parents.
2. The children were separated from the adults. Consequently they were not incorporated into the dialogue.

At the culmination of the project this would be one of my major learning experiences. This first workshop was an excellent preparation for future works shops. It was imperative that the ministry meet parents exactly where they were. Their major concern during the project was their children. George K. Johnson Sr. gives these staggering statistics, and although they date from 1995, they made a tremendous impact to the focus ministry.

These statistics translate to mean that children from a fatherless home are:

- 5 times more likely to commit suicide
- 32 times more likely to runaway
- 20 times more likely to have behavioral disorders
- 14 times more likely to commit rape

- 9 times more likely to drop out of high school
- 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances
- 9 times likely to end up in a state-operated institution
- 20 times more likely to end up in prison.

Daughters of single parents are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92% more likely to dissolve their own marriages.⁷⁶

The subsequent workshops by members were:

- July 13, 2008-Expectations (Parenting) - given by a minister who is also a MSW and a single parent.

(14 participants)

The Pastor prayed for the ministry. The bible lesson was Matthew 12:46-50.

An overview was given of child developmental stages and the usual behaviors exhibited at each stage. Conversation was encouraged. Using scripture from the bible book of Proverbs the parents were asked to examine these scriptures and correlate them to their child's developmental stage and their expectations; the scriptures are; Proverbs 22:6,15, 23:13 and 29:15. All participants received a copy of *Memo From A Child, To Parents*.⁷⁷

- August 10& 17 a video was shown featuring T. D. Jakes: "Ten things parents should know".⁷⁸

A workshop was lead by Christian Ed and two site team members (a nurse and a MSW, both were single parents) - (9-11 participants respectively).

The same scripture was used for Bible Study both dates:

Psalms 68:5-6 "God sets the lonely in families".

⁷⁶ George K. Johnson, Sr., *The Psychological Effects of Men Raised by Single-Parent Mothers* (Library of Congress Publication Data: Breaking the Barriers Ministry Inc., 2003).

⁷⁷ Unknown Author, *Memo From A Child, To Parents*.

⁷⁸ T. D. Jakes, *10 Things Every Single Person Should Do*, DVD. (Dallas, Texas: The Potter's House, 2006).

These two workshops discussed T.D. Jakes understanding of: *Ten Things Every Single Person Should Do*.

- Also on August 17, 2008 the president of the Parkchester branch of the N.A.A.C.P. addressed the group regarding the importance of their responsibility to vote and to be part of the voter registration campaign. The more residents registered, the greater allotment of funds distributed in our communities to help with education, health and social resources. Four participants volunteered to register people in the community.
- One of our single parent fathers became our official voter registration person in the church. Every Sunday he was in the fellowship Hall registering voters.

This education motivated the ministry to become more civic minded. September 28, 2008 - Gangs in Parkchester – Led by a member who is a police officer and a single parent father. (10 adults and 3 children attended)

This workshop gave an overview of what parents need to understand regarding gangs.

Examples of what to look for:

1. The colors your child wears.
2. Examine for tattoos.
3. Recognize certain hand gestures/ shakes
4. Scrutinize what your child is logging into on the computer
5. Make sure your child has a state ID regardless of their age. They could be arrested for vagrancy or loitering if they are without appropriate identification.

The state ID forms were given to the single parents and offered to the whole church family as well. These forms were made available in the office for anyone including the community.

- October 12, 2008- Emergency Preparedness- A member of the Cumbayah Single Parent Ministry. (12 participants)

Bible study-Ephesians 6:10-13 “Put on the full armor of God”

The group was given information regarding what they needed to have if they had a fire or some other emergency and needed to leave their home in a hurry. Community resources were given. What was needed in a first aid kit was replaced.

- October 26, 2008- “Your child and the guidance counselor”. This workshop was led by a member of the church who is a school guidance counselor. (3 participants)

Due to the low participation we used this as an individual prayer session. The workshop leader was invited to the next session.

- November 9, 2008- “Your child and the guidance counselor.”
(16 adults-5 children participated).

The bible lesson was Luke 12:22-31 “Do not worry”.

A synopsis was rendered on what is a guidance counselor. What a guidance counselor can and cannot do for your child. Parents were urged to be involved and educated regarding what was going on in the schools.

Several personal issues were discussed. The children complained about a school program many of them were in that required 5-6 hours of homework a night—if the teacher was not able to finish teaching a subject it became the evening’s homework. Parents and children were frustrated. The guidance counselor offered her help.

In addition to these forums the Cumbayah was invited to participate in the NAACP Parkchester branch seminars. These included Gang Awareness, Racial Profiling, an

Education forum, voter awareness. They were also included in the Christmas celebration with the children of Seneca and Freeman house. Both of these are homeless shelters. .

Evaluation:

This strategy exceeded our expectations. One workshop, which I am extremely proud of, was the Emergency Preparedness workshop. First it was a single parent who had never spoken publicly before. The evaluations concurred that the ministry was leading them into activities and formulating ideas for the ministry that they thought was beyond their capabilities. This particular single parent was in the process of defeating multiple personal challenges in addition to having a teenage daughter. I observed her positive transformation as the ministry blossomed. I was ecstatic when she volunteered to do a workshop. It was at this workshop that I concluded the project to be a success. The experience was transformative for everyone who participated in the activities arranged for the homeless shelter. It allowed all those involved to lay their worries aside and help those less fortunate. It was surmised by the group that everyone has something they can give even if it is your time. I consider this a rousing success.

The end of the project had ratified the next strategy for equipping and training mentors for the single parents. Thus,

- The project had been altered to use only church members to train.
- The pastor of the Parkchester Baptist Church was an expert in the field of mentoring. She would do the training.
- The mentoring required was essentially a support mechanism not a full mentoring program.

“The Faith Fellowship Partners” became the name of six elders of the church who were chosen by Pastor Rev. Dr. Sinclair and I. Each name was discussed in detail. The church had long known these members—some for as long as thirty years. They were

members in good standing with impeccable character, integrity and spiritual wisdom. I interviewed each of them and all who were chosen were willing to be apart of this support system.

The pastor met with the group and augmented what was required of them.

1. They would be assigned two or three single parent families
2. To be available to listen to the single Parents
3. Give them a telephone call at least once a month
4. Talk with the children
5. Don't give advice
6. Do share your story
7. Inform the pastor if the single parents need assistance.

The single parents were informed of their Faith fellowship Partners. The timeline was not met as of May-June 2008. This particular out-reach was not formed until late November, due to the difficulty in getting this group of elders together at one time and Pastor's time constraint.

At the end of the project only one ministry member had voiced satisfaction especially for the prayers she had received. The parents were not surveyed on their Faith fellowship partners due to the limited time this aspect of the project was allotted. I would be remiss not to make note of the fact that if a member of the Cumbayah needs mentoring or counseling, the Pastor is available. If extensive services are required they will be referred to the appropriate community services.

Strategy #4 was providing a respite for our single parents at least one Saturday a month during the summer. Due to Saturday Church activities that included the children it

was not necessary to offer the service until August when most of the church activities were curtailed and members were on vacation.

The Christian education ministry recruited six volunteers for four consecutive Saturdays August 2,9,16, and 23 from the church membership. Three volunteers would be in the Church from 11:00-2:00pm on the August 2, and 16 and three volunteers would be in the Church from 11:00-2:00PM on August 9, and 23.

The program consisted of:

- Age specific games.
- Videos
- Story Telling
- Snacks

Evaluation:

Although this respite for the children had been announced all through the project, it was poorly utilized. On two of the Saturdays none of the parents brought their children. The volunteers stayed until the allotted time had expired. One Saturday two children participated. On another Saturday three children participated. One parent that took advantage of the respite stated: “I am grateful for the time to be without responsibility for a few hours” The children enjoyed themselves.

When I asked a parent why they didn’t bring their child she stated,” I forgot”. Although under-utilized this strategy was a success because three parents did bring their children on one of the Saturdays.

Strategy #5

The single parents were receptive to the idea of a formal emergency child-care network, but were not comfortable entrusting their children to someone unfamiliar. The single parents decided amongst themselves that they would share emergency baby-sitting. Although the Ministerial staff and Christian Ministry did not develop a formal network, they had empowered the Cumbayah participants enough to do this on their own. Telephone numbers and e-mails were shared to enhance communication within the group so there could be alternatives if someone was unable to baby-sit as agreed. This developed into a success unforeseen.

Goal # 3

This goal was intrinsically personal to me. Throughout my spiritual journey I have always yearned to retreat to a “safe” place where I could be restored from the constant ambushes to my personal experiences in this life’s journey. I know the struggles single parents experience trying to go it alone. I was alone and lonely, rearing three sons in the city for many years. To say the least it was traumatizing at times. For many of the single parents it is traumatizing as well. During the course of the ten months of the project, members of the Cumbayah single parent family ministry became homeless, had break-up of relations, lost their jobs, had trouble with their children, had to deal with the court system and experienced a myriad of other dilemmas encapsulating their lives. The more this project progressed the more I was convinced there had to be a place of relief and respite for those people who are enmeshed in parenting and attempting to survive in this very stressful and complicated world. There should be a place that is without judgment and condemnation; a place where there is acceptance of where and who you

are. Unfortunately there are times when the church becomes major part of the problem.

Terrie Williams (although her study focuses on depression) gives a valid depiction of some churches attitude towards people who are struggling:

Some members of the clergy” demonize” our afflictions. They literally call upon the devil and the devil’s work when they talk about our problems with drugs, sex, and gambling, instead of educating people about how those activities are so often symptoms of even deeper problems-like depression-that need specific attention. Praying harder won’t make an alcoholic sober, but a pastor who encourages those in his/her(*Italics mine*) congregation who drink too much to find God in AA may be saving a life and a family- not to mention educating the rest of the congregation.⁷⁹

Hence this final goal of the project was extremely important to the project but more so to the church family. The first strategy to establish a single parent support group was not accomplished by the culmination of the project.

Evaluation:

All the proper steps were made to start a formal support group. A leader was chosen and approved by the pastor. She had accepted the assignment of being support group leader. She had been chosen because she was a committed member, had shown the most growth and initiative. She related well to the other members. Unfortunately she missed her training sessions. Every effort was made to accommodate her. Even to the point of putting the support group on hold.

Allowing people to verbalize during meetings compensated this lack of a formal support group. Each meeting had trained site team members in attendance that was able to facilitate and or schedule a counseling session or referral if it were warranted.

⁷⁹ Terrie M. Williams, *Black Pain, It Just looks Like We’re Not Hurting* (New York: Scribner,2008), 215.

Strategy 2:

This strategy was patterned after the “Playwright Mentoring Project” The project PMP “gives teenagers a safe place to talk about issues in their daily lives-issues at home, in school, at work, with friends-all of it kept in strict confidence. Through rigorous theatre instruction, participants learn the fundamentals of theatre games and improvisation from experienced mentors. Theatre is used as a means of self-exploration and self-expression.”⁸⁰

The Parkchester Baptist Church drama ministry was deeply involved with Cumbayah. As a result many of the members of the ministry were members of the drama ministry. This made it very convenient. The members acted in two dramas focused on single parenting. One was performed at Vacation bible school and one was performed at the project end event. The drama ministry A.C.T.S. (Acting Christians Teaching Scripture) is inter-generational and the director is a trained youth at risk counselor.

This Strategy was quite a success.

Strategy 3:

Each participant was given the assignment of researching one community resource that they felt the group might use as a community service. They were asked to give a verbal report on the organization and tell why they chose this service. How they were to present this information was left up to them. It took from April to November to complete this strategy. I had to remind the participants to do their homework. In the final analysis they did complete the task and were able to discuss the community service they had researched. The details were very informative. I learned a great deal about the

⁸⁰ Barrington Theatre Company, “Playwright Mentoring Project,” Barrington Theatre Company, <http://www.barringtonstageco.org/education/playwrightmentoring.php> (accessed February 1 2009).

Parkchester community. One of the members of the church designed the cover.

Developing a community resource book was challenge for the group, but once completed, I believe produced the most pride.

Strategy 4-5:

Childcare was provided at every workshop, meeting, or ministry event by the young adult ministry or Christian education ministry. By the end of the project the children were taking part in many of the workshops. They would ask me, “When is the next Cumbayah meeting?” Creating a safe haven is structuring an atmosphere that is conducive to peace, comfort, trust, and joyful involvement. By the projects end the children felt nurtured and protected. To me that is what success looks like. Even in these stressful economic times we were able to post an employment board. Job positions were posted for the Post Office, The New York Transit, the Health and Hospital Corporation. Job fairs were posted as well. Unfortunately at project’s end I had not heard of any one being hired as a direct consequence of these postings.

The single parent family day was scheduled for October but due to conflicting parent and church scheduling we were unable to complete this venture. However, for the “Cumbayah project end event”, the single parents were completely involved. Invitations were extended to New York Theological Seminary, my project advisor, fellow clergy, the community and the church family. The attendance was less than expected since it was the day after Christmas and many were out of town.

Participants including the site team gave a heartfelt testimony concerning their struggles with single parent hood. Their comments were open and honest. An

atmosphere of trust and love had been accomplished and they felt they could be vulnerable without being victimized. This was success to me.

CHAPTER 5

SOMEBODY'S THANKFUL, MY LORD, CUMBAYAH

Analysis of Ministerial Competencies

There are two areas that the site team and I agreed separately and corporately would be my areas of growth focus.

1. Prophetic Agent
2. Administrator

The first area Prophetic Agent encompasses three objectives:

- The ability to translate intuitions about needed change into specific strategies.
- A willingness to embrace risk in order to create social change.
- An ability to communicate to others a passion for justice to inspire change.

Stephen R. Covey, in his book *The 7 habits of Highly Effective People* states:

“The most effective way I know to begin with the end in mind is to develop a personal mission statement or philosophy or creed. It focuses on what you want to be (character) and to do (contributions and achievements) and on the values or principles upon which being and doing are based”⁸¹.

I have chosen to begin these objectives by offering my mission list formulated during a NYTS class session. I remember they were quickly created for there was limited

⁸¹ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 106.

time allotted, but as I peruse the listing, although written hastily, I am confident these are my foundation as a prophetic agent.

Mission List

1. Consult God first in all things
2. Love God above all things
3. Exercise self care as much as possible
4. Serve God's people from the heart and not from the head
5. Be a good and wise wife
6. To my adult children be a mentor
7. Be a grandmother not only to my biological grand-children, but all children
8. Have an excellent work ethic in church and secular life
9. Listen, listen, listen
10. Always edify never tear down
11. Always strive for excellence never accept mediocrity in self
12. Love, love, love

I took Mr. Covey's suggestion to start with the end in mind. In other words to have a vision and set forth strategies to bring into reality is paramount in realizing goals successfully. The vision of creating a single parent ministry in an atmosphere where the words "single parent" was usually met with raised eyebrows would entail my skills to increase enormously as a change agent in the church. I had a few obstacles. The major obstacle being I was an associate minister of the Church, consequently I had to proceed as per the pastor's purview. This particular obstacle became an asset by the end of the

project. I matured in my intuitive gifts to know when to proceed and when to recede on project goals and strategies. This experience was simultaneously humbling and strengthening. I had to control my emotions and frustrations while increasing and perfecting my spiritual growth. Consequently my site team members told me that I became a role model of how to perform as a positive force in any situation. The goal set of raising awareness in the church of the challenges of single parent families was a daunting task initially. I surveyed the church and was met with apathy. I met with a focus group of single parents and they admitted they were “okay because they had each other.”

I discussed it with my site team and they were interested but the vision was murky. The revelation finally slapped me in the face that I would have to be the one to champion the need for this ministry. It would be my primary goal to set fire to my church family on the necessity of truly embracing our single parents and their children. My mission list reminded me to serve God’s people with my heart and not my head. I found as I progressed in completing the strategies by listening and observing the participants the process unfolded with little stress. I also noticed when I tried to force an issue or strategy—for example another bible study, essentially because it was on my “to do” list (strategies) stumbling blocks emerged. To serve with my heart prompted me to increase my prayer life. It also prepared me to become more contemplative in the presence of the Spirit of God. Becoming more disciplined in my spiritual life fostered my ability to translate this spiritual confidence to the participants of the project.

My communication skills have been increased. Stephen Covey states: “Your character is constantly radiating, communicating. From it, in the long run, I come

instinctively to trust or distrust you and your efforts with me.”⁸² Communication can be verbal or non-verbal. I learned the more consistent you are, the louder, the clearer, the more trustworthy you become. Again it is serving with the heart that for me is the most valid form of communication because it transcends words. People can feel it or sense it and know if it is genuine. I learned to be able to communicate in a fashion that what I am articulating can be understood inter-generationally. I asked questions of the individual/group to verify their understanding. This was most effective in group sessions that included the children. I also had to increase my skills in talking with the un-churched to effectively radiate the love of God. This was one of the frustrations I had at the beginning of the project. It was one of my reasons to do this project. In Alvin Reid’s book *The Radically Unchurched*, he expounds: “Jesus was criticized for being a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). You will be more like Jesus based on the lost people you reach than the saved people you impress.”⁸³ I have found this to be true at the end of this project. I have been blessed beyond measure being in the presence of God’s transforming a group of people that were struggling with any number of difficult issues. They were still able to praise and talk of God’s presence in their life, regardless the situation. I take exception though when Alvin Reid states:

When addressing culture we begin with either the gospel or with people’s needs. We choose to start with theology or anthropology. Most today begin with the needs of people. I believe we should begin with the Creator, not the creation; with the Savior, not those needing salvation.⁸⁴

⁸² Covey, *The 7 Habits*, 238.

⁸³ Alvin I. Reid, *The Radically Unchurched* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2002), 44.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

Jesus met the people where they were. He gave of himself and the people he ministered to recognized his transcendent spirit. Walter J. Burghart, S.J., in his article, "Love Heals" states:

' Jesus healed on three levels: the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. The physical: He commanded the paralytic to take up his mat and walk, cured the dying slave of Capernaum's royal official, raised from the dead the only son of Nain's widow. The psychological: He restored dignity to an adulteress, showed a proud Pharisee at table how a sinful woman could love more than he, persuaded a cured demonic not to follow him but to return to his dear ones a new man. The spiritual: Above and beyond all other all other healing, in his person he brought to the world, all the world, God's favor, God's grace, God's love."⁸⁵

In interacting with God's people I have experienced that clouding of their eyes when I began to pontificate on the bible, without hearing or addressing their immediate needs. It is the caring, the empathy, and the articulation and praxis that lend hope. Given hope, a living, loving, God becomes a possibility in lives that have had to make it—they believed—on their own. I have become comfortable with my calling as a spiritual caring prophetic agent. As a result of completing the Cumbayah single parent family project I am equipped to more effectively identify my own personal dynamics in order to understand my impact on others. I have learned to become more reflective in my assessment of my ministerial calling.

Consequently, I attempted to create what Thomas Hawkins terms nurturing thinking, a learning climate. He states:

Congregations sometimes treat people as a utilitarian resource. Church members' time and abilities exist to help the congregation grow, develop more impressive ministries, or offer a wider range of programs and services. Learning congregations invert this formula. The primary shift in

⁸⁵ Walter, J. Burghardt, *Love Heals, The Living Pulpit*, 6, no. 2 (April-June 1997).

a learning congregation is from using people to create a better congregation to using the congregation to nurture better people.”⁸⁶

The more workshops, meetings, and rap sessions we had with the church, single parents and the children, the more excited and passionate they became. The atmosphere was imbued with joy in helping each other through service. By the end of the project I had become increasingly more confident in my ability to communicate my passion to inspire others to create social change in the church. The church ultimately began addressing issues of single parent families and going further by embracing and including them as true family members in the Parkchester Baptist Church.

My mission list contained two other very important strategies that were necessary for me to excel as a prophet agent. They are: listen, listen, listen and love, love, love. This project helped me cultivate within myself what I have yearned for in the Church setting; unconditional listening and unconditional agape love. As the project came to an end the office became a place of refuge. The site team and I jokingly called it the confessional because an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality, and safety had been created and people came to unload their burdens. I discovered I was not only a prophetic agent in transforming the truth to inclusiveness but during the process I became the prophetic agent of Christ’s love here on earth. I was the only voice many had heard that proclaimed hope. I truly believe Clemens Sedmak THESIS 50 which states:

Theology is an expression of the hope that a few people can make a difference. Theology cultivates the art of hoping. There are at least seven important features of hope; Hope rises in the darkness of a crisis; hope can give reasons to keep believing; hope paradoxically both requires and engenders patience and endurance; hope means wideness and openness and also risk and willingness to change; hope is stubborn and endures long

⁸⁶ Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation*, 26.

periods of delayed fulfillment; hope admits small beginnings; and the message of hope is the promise of life.⁸⁷

This D. Min project transformed me into a person who emphatically has chosen to be an agent of God's hope. My main proof of what God can do is using my own story. I am living proof of the grace and the transformative power that God's grace can encompass. During this project it became evident that my theology was one of hope. "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) became my mantra and the single parents mantra. It is this hope that helps us persevere.

The site team chair evaluation is as follows:

It has been a delightful experience to serve under the leadership of Rev. Judy Pride on the establishment of Cumbayah! I strongly believe that Rev. Pride has truly practiced many of the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, patience, faithfulness and self-control. I have recognized her skill to bring peace into heated situations when people seemed to be contrary. I have seen her remain steadfast and faithful when encouraging members of the ministry that everything would be all right.

As an administrator, she had a plan. However, she was always open to suggestions and willing to incorporate those that would add value to the project. As a leader, she was able to clearly communicate to the group who the audience was, steps to be taken, and our potential impact as a church family. She also engaged us in collaborative problem solving when needed. Her approach seemed to speak to Genesis 12:2, 'I will bless you...and I will make you a blessing to others'. She was an active listener, not just a listener. She often reminded us how one person can be used to help another, despite the circumstance. To realize that when encouraged to help others. As Christian Education chair, she challenged our team for the better. Cumbayah is seen as a vital offering to the church, thanks to Rev. Pride's gifts and talents.

Blessings

Sis Audrey Washington (site team member-chairperson Christian education)

A single male grandparent evaluation follows:

⁸⁷ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 168.

The single parent ministry Cumbayah of Parkchester Baptist Church is a profound and much needed ministry of God's love because as our own community's demographics attest to, the need is all around us right here in Bronx Country, N.Y. As a remarkable instructor once taught me in discipleship class, my four mandates as Christian/disciples of Christ is to reach out to all and provide Assistance to All. In this alone we perpetuate God's love! Astonishingly, prior to Parkchester Baptist Church, namely Rev Pride's initiative any 'church' sanctioned outreach specifically targeting single parents was, sadly lacking in our Bronx community. Unfortunately, until now, there has been an absence of spiritual outreach geared for the mom's and dad' in our community who are struggling to raise children in an ever increasing dangerous world. A world which gives children a shorter span of innocence. and fewer places where parents can bring their children. This ministry lovingly called Cumbayah of which I am an enthusiastic participant now life-long member allows me, now a single-grandparent 45 years of age, to relate to and empathize with what these new parents are going through.

The second learning goal I strived to improve is that of Administrator. The three strategies set forth for me to consider were;

- The ability to involve other persons in the process of decision making
- Ability to identify and make use of personal and material resources of the congregation, organization, or community.
- Ability to work to realize the mission of the whole through the various tasks that forms the parts.

The book *Action Research* by Ernest Stringer gave me a working model of guiding my quest in improving my administrative skills. Stringer gives this illustration:

A Basic Action Research Routine:

Look-

- Gather relevant information (Gather data)
- Build a picture: Describe the situation (Define and describe)

Think-

- Explore and analyze: What is happening here? (Analyze)
- Interpret and explain: How/why are things as they are? (Theorize)

Act-

- Plan (Report)
- Implement
- Evaluate⁸⁸

Stringer goes on to say, “Although the ‘look, think, act’ routine is presented in a linear format throughout this book, it should be read as a continually recycling set of activities.”⁸⁹

I learned to be flexible in my decision-making by observing the situation, and then formulating an alternative plan of action with an evaluating process. For example I originally thought at the start of the project single parents would come running to this marvelous project I was undertaking. I was to find out much to my dismay that was not the case. While services were provided, bible classes planned, child-care offered, only a few took advantage. At first I took this personally. I had to take time for self-reflection and examination of my own personal concerns of failure and ineptitude. I was able to focus on amplifying the abilities I already possessed and sharing the sincere passion I had to accomplish this project. The primary focus now became not me, the doctoral degree, but the single parent family ministry and the more pressing concern that I was not meeting the single parents needs. It was decided we had to be more pro-active in attracting the single parents. The site team found ways to advertise, flyers, in the weekly bulletin, from the pulpit, and word of mouth. The day of the parent meetings was changed to Sunday to be more sensitive of the Parents time. Food was given and eaten family style to encourage a family atmosphere and increase fellowshiping in the church. I also learned to be more deliberate in my responses. By choosing my words and listening actively, I became a more effective administrator. I have had four units of CPE

⁸⁸ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publication Inc., 2007), 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 19.

(Clinical Pastoral Education) and the action reflection method coincides with NYTS and Stringers methods. By frequently assessing myself through self-reflection, evaluations from the ministry participants and site team I was able to continually assess where I needed improvement. I recognized I had an inclination to want to fix everything, which was unrealistic, and counter-productive. I learned that my goal was to empower the participants to explore resources including each other to improve their situations. I learned I function more productively in a non-directive atmosphere; it afforded me the opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and claim my own expertise in the administrative process. As I became more confident in my role as administrator, I was more comfortable delegating more of the responsibility. It became much easier to empower the site team, the single parents and the church because I genuinely understood the joy in liberation of coming out of your comfort zone.

I have become confident claiming my strengths and weaknesses. One of my weaknesses that even at the end of the project I am still improving is listening and feeling comfortable in silence. In her book, *Listening the Forgotten Skill*, Madelyn Burley-Allen gives this insight, “Listening involves a more sophisticated mental process than hearing. It demands energy and discipline. Listening is a learned skill. The first step is to realize that effective listening is active, not a passive”.⁹⁰

One of the most important vehicles of empowerment became just listening. Allowing the voiceless to have a voice. Encouraging their voices—whether the parents or the children—gave them permission to feel their self worth. The amazing revelation for me was this could be achieved in the experience of silence. Madelyn Burley-Allen gives this insight:

⁹⁰ Madelyn Burley-Allen, *Listening: the Forgotten Skill* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 3.

Another example of nonverbal behavior that can have several interpretations is silence. It can be so cold that you shudder in response to it; it can be so warm that you are encouraged to continue and feel supported by it; or it can be a neutral message to continue talking.⁹¹

I learned to use the silence to encourage further conversation and support.

Mr. A. – “Rev. I just don’t know what to do I am lonely”.

Rev. P. – “lonely?”

Mr. A- “My ex-wife makes it very difficult for me to have a relationship and the only people I talk to are my children”.

Rev.P- silence

Mr. A – “The only time I fell better is when I am at church. I have made a lot of friends in Cumbayah. Maybe we can go out as a group and talk about some of our issues. Thanks Rev. for listening. I’m going to talk with the group and see what they think”.

Rev. P- “I’m here whenever you need to talk”.

This interchange may seem easy, however it was one of the hardest encounters I experienced because I wanted to talk. The more I exercised not always giving advice but offering my self, the more transformation I was to witness in the group. I have learned through this project that my role as an agent of the Divine is fostered in community; that I am to enter into a relationship with God’s people by being present. To be an ordained minister does not give me authority over god’s people but it does give me the impetus to be compassionate, empathetic, and even silent but still strong in my spiritual presence. This was a tremendous gift for me to learn and experience.

⁹¹ Burley-Allen, *Listening*, 142.

Journaling was difficult for me and I continue to do it sporadically. In reading what I have written, the benefits and personal insights assisted in my growth process as an administrator. For example I wrote: “[r]elationship for me has become reciprocal. When counseling a single parent or a child they bring God and I bring God then somewhere during the session the participant feel valued because of the presence of the divine emanating between the two of us in the midst of them carrying their cross”. That is a profound revelation that will continue to impact my ministry for as long as I live.

Finally to be an effective administrator every move must be done prayerfully. Alvin I. Reid states: “The goal of prayer is not merely to talk to God, or even to get answers. The goal is to get to know Him. I define prayer as intimacy with god that leads to the fulfillment of His purposes”.⁹²

The Site team and I prayed every time we met, which was at a minimum twice a month as a group. I prayed individually with members almost every day. The members of the ministry the parents and the children were encouraged to pray whenever they felt the desire. We tried contemplative prayer on several occasions. George D. McClain in his book *Claiming All Things for God* gives this definition for this type of prayer: “Contemplative prayer is prayer of simple being, of resting before God”.⁹³ We found this to be very therapeutic to the group it allowed time to let go of the stresses of the day and allow the Spirit of God to enter the fellowship hall bringing a sense of comfort and peace before we began our sessions.

⁹² Reid, *The Radically Unchurched*, 51.

⁹³ George D. McClain, *Claiming All Things for God* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abington Press, 1998). 68.

This practice resulted in an increasingly disciplined prayer life as a ministry. God blessed us with great things happening in the lives of the participants and thankfully me as well.

The Chairperson of the site team Ingrid Moses writes as an observation:

When the Site Team began its journey I knew that we would work together, towards the goals laid out to us by Rev. Pride but I had no idea we would form a group like the one that now exist. Cumbayah has filled a need in our Church, which until now seemed not to have existed. When the group began to open up and to share very personal thoughts and experiences it became clear there is an element probably in every church in America that we overlook. We provide religious instructions and some social events, but we fail to see the emotional turmoil that many single parents must deal with on a daily basis.

Rev. Pride touched the needs by allowing many of the group to facilitate the sessions of information which impact being a parent. The opportunity to share empowered some of the group members. We saw change in people as a result of this practice.

I have always worked with the children of the Church and only knew their parents as just parents. I did however learn a great deal about who they were as people because of my work with Cumbayah. The group has served as an eye opening adventure into a new part of our church life.

Many churches all over America must have a large population of single parents for whatever reason. I pray that our efforts will encourage the development of these kinds of ministry in other churches.

A single parent grandmother evaluation is as follows:

I became a Deacon in January of this year. Because of this ministry I am in meetings sometimes with Rev Pride. Being with her a bit more than usual, I get to hear her thoughts on certain subjects. When she mentioned wanting to start a single parent ministry I decided to come to the first meeting. Not because I felt I needed to be apart of such a group, but because I wanted to support her. I came to the first meeting and I just kept returning.

I now realize that not every single parent will ask for help but they will go for help if the know there is a group of people like themselves that they can depend on. People always assume that the only help single parents need is monetary. This is not true. There are times when you need to talk.

You need someone to just give you some good advice. You need someone to say, “God will bring you through”. Even though you know this, you just need someone to remind you.

My child is now 26 years old with a child of her own. She is now a single parent and I am a single grandparent. Basically we are the only two people that my grandchild has. Yes, I came to the first Cumbayah meeting to support Rev Pride but I come to the meetings when I can and I am a member of the Cumbayah ministry because I realize I need the support of the ministry and the other parents in my position.

CONCLUSION

Research revealed that there are several hindrances to today's Church creating a single parent family ministry. Of the 60 out of 100 churches surveyed for the project none were actively reaching out with intentional single parent ministry. The Church is a place where people of God are actively working together to establish the "Kingdom of God" here on earth." The Church should be the agent of Christ at work in the world. Unfortunately, our study concluded that the excuses rendered for not embracing single parent ministry are numerous. We discovered in our church family the limited ability to exercise the mandate of forgiveness of seventy times seven brought forth by, Jesus: "Jesus said to him, "I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew:18:22). Another excuse is the enormity of the many issues that come along with people who are struggling, disenfranchised, with inadequate financial, emotional, and spiritual resources. As the project progressed it was implicit that a deep commitment that encompassed not only time, but selfless involvement is necessary for this kind of ministry. The project leaders concurred at the end of the project that only a team effort would be of value to a ministry whose members frequently need spiritual direction, hope, and multiple resources. Final research ascertained that motivation and commitment of the church leadership and laity is a major factor in sustaining a single parent family ministry. It took time for the development of the participants to trust that the leadership would not leave them or forsake them. Once this had been established in their hearts they were generous in their involvement. Our society has been conditioned to accept that the family consists

of two parents, and deviation from that standard is deviation from the norm. This conditioning has occurred over many generations; although throughout history there have been many examples of varying familial makeup. Examples of the variety of families can be found throughout the Bible. The Bible includes single parents Lot, the widow Zarepheth, and Hagar just to name a few.

Our research concluded that the Bible does not specify a “correct” family structure. The church must become more gracious in its practice of inclusion. We are all part of the human family, and since the times of Adam and Eve people have toiled together in order to make their lives better.

Further reasons for avoiding single parent family ministry were lack of space and resources. We found at Parkchester Baptist church that as long as the ministry had a date and time wherever it was held the single parents adjusted.

Our project study found that an intentional single parent family ministry with specific goals and strategies carefully executed was a success at Parkchester Baptist Church. At the conclusion of the project it was revealed the program facilitator must be knowledgeable in the subject matter and versatile in their modes of instruction to have a successful ministry. The project also proved a culturally relevant teaching plan to train and equip all participants is imperative to increasing the understanding and passion required to ignite and sustain the interest of the single parents and the church. This empowerment through teaching, action and reflection increased the knowledge and confidence of the ministry participants as well. The single parents were equipped to take ownership of the ministry. It was also discovered that dialogue is essential between the parents, children and the church to create empowerment. The ministry must be designed

to fit the needs of the single parent families and not fit the needs of the church, for example, increasing the church membership.

Our research indicated the children are an intricate element in the ministry and should be included in workshops when relevant. This fosters the family atmosphere. It also emulates positive communication forms. Otherwise activities should be planned for them while their parents are in workshops. Children should not be made to feel they are an afterthought. They should be valued and assured they are loved and an integral part of the ministry/church.

Finally, our research during the project verified that involving the whole church in the ministry decreased the hindrances that prevented a single parent ministry before the project was established. Further research noted the need to be innovative in intergenerational involvement. Investigating through verbal and written surveys ascertained how each ministry was willing to give their participation. This was helpful in maintaining enthusiasm and commitment, as each ministry's assignment was their own design.

The project was a success in utilizing the expertise of the church members and the single parents to educate each other. As part of this process they were motivated to go out into the community and research for themselves the resources that were available to them. Our demonstration project at the Parkchester Baptist Church concluded that if you include all the people in the process, educate and equip them with relevant knowledge and praxis they will excel in making the project/ ministry a success. Further they will embrace the Good News of Jesus Christ because they see God in action in the church and in their lives.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1 Demonstration Project

APPENDIX 2 Site Team Assignments

APPENDIX 3 Cumbayah Single Parent Initial Survey

APPENDIX 4 Cumbayah Initial Agenda

APPENDIX 5 Cumbayah Brochure

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APPENDIX 8 Evaluation form

APPENDIX 9 Training Workshops Agendas

APPENDIX 10 Cumbayah Evaluation sheet

APPENDIX 11 Father's Day Agenda

APPENDIX 12 N.A.A.C.P. Workshops

APPENDIX 13 Church Notices

APPENDIX 14 Church calendar

APPENDIX 15 Cumbayah evaluation form

APPENDIX 16 A Reminder

APPENDIX 17 Vacation Bible School

APPENDIX 18 Do you believe in Miracles An original play by A.C.T.S

APPENDIX 19 Homework for the parents

APPENDIX 20 End of Project Agenda

APPENDIX 21Faith Fellowship Partners

APPENDIX 22 An Invitation

APPENDIX 23 Single Parenting GOTCHA A play by A.C.T.S

APPENDIX 24 Cumbayah Resource Book

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